Chrysalis
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Chrysalis

by cunninglingus

Summary

The aging, widowed Allfather has found himself a sweet little pet, and Thor's not jealous. Nope.

Notes

~~This fic began as a PWP in the summer of 2014 and here I am, in 2020 and beyond, still fucking working on it lmao.~~ **UPDATE JUNE 2020 I FINISHED IT!! ARGHHHH!!!!!!!**

It's a rather twisty fic, I'm afraid, and my Thor is pretty dark in the beginning. I have a huge boner for asshole!Thor, so sue me.

PSA1: If you're squicked out by the Odin/Loki, rest assured that there isn't actually any Odinsex in this fic, real or implied, although they do get a little cozy with each other.
PSA2: The dubcon/noncon warnings are there to be on the safe side, since Loki is enslaved and technically can't give full consent. Heed the warnings if that's not your jam.

Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Once upon a time, Thor would have welcomed anything that brought his father diversion. Stricken with grief, Odin has aged fifty years in the ten since his wife, the much beloved Queen Frigga, passed to the realm of Valhalla. No feast, no music, no dance, no merriment could lessen the deep, downwards lines creasing his face. Anything at all would be better than the constant state of mourning Odin had sunk into.

Or so Thor would have thought.

And then Odin came home from a retreat in Vanaheim with a little Jotun slave named Loki.

Thor's not entirely sure how Odin came to acquire Loki - if the thing had been a gift, or if Odin had purchased him himself - but for whatever reason, something about the black haired runtling had caught his one eye, and they'd been near inseparable ever since. Little could Thor have known, that this Loki would change the course of his life in ways unimaginable.

Ah, but perhaps we should start from the beginning.

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Thor can feel a throbbing headache begin to build behind his eyeballs. Council has been dragging on for an extra hour and a half, and there is only so long Thor can listen to his advisors ramble on about tax reform before he absolutely, unequivocally, needs a drink. The day has been long and tiresome, and Thor just wants to get it over with as quickly as possible so he can excuse himself to his bath and his supper.

There is only one more piece of business Thor must attend to before he can be free for the evening.

"The Allfather, where is he?" Thor demands, charging into his father's rooms with his papers, as he usually does after council. Sensing his mood, the servants scatter like mice.

"Where is he?" Thor repeats. "Pela? I'm in no mood for this."

“Resting, my lord," comes a reply in a voice that is much too male to be Pela's.

Thor turns towards a lone figure, who stands up as Thor approaches.

“Who are you?” Thor demands, standing face to face with a lithe young man he’d never seen before. “Where’s Pela?”

The boy kneels all the way down, then back up.

“I am Loki, my Lord. I am the Allfather’s new attendant. Pela has been discharged from her post.”

The boy speaks with a soft, melodic accent. He is not of Asgard, that much is certain. A slave, then. A foreign slave.

It’s only then that Thor notices the prone form of his father, sleeping soundly on the couch by the fireside. It’s a welcome sight, for Thor knows his father had been having trouble sleeping of late. He sometimes has difficulty breathing, and often coughs himself awake. Right now, however, his chest rises and falls in smooth pulses.

“Attendant,” Thor repeats incredulously, looking Loki up and down. Attendant, indeed. There is only one purpose for a slave this lovely in a king’s inner chambers. Thor doesn’t know why he’s surprised. His father’s still a man, after all. An old man, but a man nonetheless, and Pela certainly wasn't much to look at. It shouldn’t be his business what Odin chooses to do privately, and Thor himself has more than his fair share of lovers and concubines. Still, Thor wrinkles his nose. He doesn’t like the thought of his elderly father touching anyone, let alone such a pretty young thing as this.

“And I have only just got his Imperial Majesty to nap, so kindly lower your voice.”

The slave says this so casually that Thor could almost laugh in indignation.

“Do you know, slave, to whom you are speaking?”

“Apologies, most gracious Prince,” Loki does a token curtsey-like conciliatory gesture. “I meant no

offense."

Thor strides over and takes Loki's chin, tilting it to and fro inspect his face. It's then that he sees the boy's eyes are a luminous shade of green, lined with dark lashes. His features are sharp, yet delicate, and he possesses a soft-looking pair of petal lips.

"You are not Aesir," says Thor.

"No my Lord."

Thor frowns, disliking how Loki does not seem to be cowed by Thor's size and station.

"What are you?"

"I am of Jotunheim."

Thor's eyebrows shoot up. "A runt, then." Thor grips his chin more harshly now in an attempt to elicit a proper reaction. "I've never seen a Jotunn runt before. I thought they'd be….bluer."

"I have assumed this colouring to better assimilate into Aesir society. Highness."

Thor shakes Loki's head in reproach and releases him. Thor does not like the little slave's attitude. If he belonged to Thor, he certainly would not be speaking so familiarly. But since he is Odin's, Thor cannot lay a hand on him, and Loki must know it.

"Send for me as soon as he wakes, runt," Thor says, "And don't tarry."

"I can simply have those signed when the Allfather wakes," Loki suggests, nodding to the documents under Thor's arm, "If that would be easier. I would not want to trouble you further."

Thor stops in his tracks and cocks his head.

“What are you again?”

Loki pauses. “I am - the Allfather’s attendant.”

“Try again.”

Confusion knots Loki’s brow, his mouth opening and closing, clearly unsure of the answer Thor is looking for.

“You think you fool me? With that face, those clothes? You’re his whore. Now say it.”

Loki deflates somewhat, and Thor squares his shoulders smugly.

“Speak, slave. What are you?”

“I am his whore.”

“That’s right. So listen well, whore,” Thor says, pointing a finger in Loki’s face. “You forget your place. I do not know what liberties my father lets you take, but you will not speak so freely to me, for I am the Crown Prince of Asgard, and I am King in all but name. Do you understand?”

“Yes, my lord,” Loki says in a smaller voice.

Thor turns on his heel and storms out. “As soon as he wakes.”

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Thor has been effectively acting as regent for Odin for some time. Odin has been growing ever more feeble, easily tired and increasingly hard of hearing. Thor takes to his duties with enthusiasm, already proving himself a capable leader. On the day when Odin finally passes to Valhalla, there will at least be a swift, seamless transition of power. Thor is more than ready to become king in name as well as in deed.

Until then, however, Thor must obtain Odin's signature and seal on most official documents. Thor meets with the delegation from Alfheim on Odin's behalf, renegotiating old trade treaties and brokering marriage alliances between their realms. By this time, Odin's approval is but a formality, but Thor likes to bring the documents to him himself out of respect for the aging king. For although Thor is eager to become King in his own right, he still wants to make sure Odin is kept up to date with Asgardian affairs.

Thor had never questioned whether or not the Allfather was still sound of mind until the day he came to visit his father, only to find the slave - *Loki* - in Odin's lap, pressed chest to back, with an open book in front of him. Between Loki's white silk shift and porcelain skin, Odin almost looks like he's holding a little doll. Thor wonders, briefly, if Odin dresses him like that on purpose. Like a sweet, pristine virgin. Untouched - although Thor knows Loki to be anything but.

Loki's lilting voice pauses when he hears Thor enter. He'd been reading aloud to his master, which is not entirely out of sorts, for Odin's one eye is not quite as sharp as it once was, and he has difficulty making out small script. That's not what surprises him. Rather, Thor is shocked that Loki is even able to read; and moreover, that Odin would deign to allow his slave to read to him.

"Ahem. Father, I come with the debriefings from today's meeting with Alfheim."

"Good," Odin says. "Good, my son. Set them there, I will look at them later."

Thor eyes Loki, and Loki smiles angelically back at him.

"With all due respect, Father, I'd rather deal with this now. It is most urgent that I have your approval on these treaties before I proceed with negotiations."

"Very well," Odin says with a sigh, uncurling one arm from around Loki's waist to reach for the papers. "Hand them here."

Thor hesitates, pursing his lips. The documents are classified, and are not for the eyes of a lowly slave - especially one who can *read.*

Odin senses Thor's trepidation and scoffs. "Come now, Thor, don't be so suspicious. It is simply Loki, he means no harm. He's a good boy. Aren't you, my sweet?"

“Oh yes,” Loki agrees, holding Thor’s gaze unwaveringly, the ghost of a smile on his lips, and Odin nuzzles his neck in affection. The little snot, his very presence here is an insult! He does not belong here, among men, looking up at Thor as though they were equals. Equals!

“I don’t doubt it,” Thor says through gritted teeth. “*Humor me.”*

Odin sighs, but concedes, patting Loki’s hip gently. “Fine, fine. Help me up.”

Loki sets the book down and climbs off Odin’s lap. It’s a book of stories, Thor notes. Fairy tales. What in Bor’s name is Odin doing, having a bedslave read him fairy tales? He must be succumbing to senility, surely.

Loki reaches down to help support his aging master rise to his feet. Odin moves stiffly, heavily leaning on Loki’s slim frame, as they shuffle towards the large oak desk. Loki pulls out a chair and gently settles Odin back down, and Thor grudgingly admits the slave is tender in dealing with Odin, whereas Thor is easily frustrated and often loses patience with him. Somehow this only irritates Thor further.

“Alright, let’s see them,” Odin says, fumbling, patting his pockets, “Now where did I -”

“Here, majesty,” Loki says, reaching into the front pocket of Odin’s robe and handing him his monocle.

“Ah. Very good. Thank you my dear.”

“Shall I fetch your tea?”

“No, no. Quite alright. But perhaps Thor could use a drink, he looks like he needs to relax a bit.”

Thor glowers. “I’m fine.”

“Fix Prince Thor a drink. Go on then,” Odin says breezily, making a shooing motion. “I’ll not deal

with him while he is so ill-disposed."

Loki's eyes shift fleetingly to Thor, then to his master, as if unsure.

"Straight cognac," Thor says brusquely, and Loki rushes off to obey.

Thor and Odin wait in silence for Loki to return with the drink, perched delicately on a silver serving tray alongside two glasses of ice water. Thor takes the drink and downs a generous mouthful, savoring the sweet burn. It is from his father's liquor cabinet - the best collection in all the Realms. He waits until he catches Loki's eye, then Thor licks his lips - an exaggerated, obscene gesture. The slave looks away with an embarrassed flush.

Oblivious, Odin turns to Loki. "Now, sweetheart, why don't you go draw an old man a bath, and leave us to our boring business?"

Loki kneels down in deference then pads off to the bathing chambers as he is bid, leaving Thor and Odin alone. Thor doesn't miss the way Odin watches him go. Thor might be sick.

As soon as Loki is gone, Odin sighs, clearly exasperated. "There, you willful child, are you satisfied? What oh-so important, secretive affairs do you bring me?"

"Just ones concerning the trifling matter of the governance of Asgard. Of little import."

"Watch your tone," says Odin. He squints at the document in front of him. "What's this?"

"The renewed treaty with Alfheim. The terms have all been negotiated. Just sign it."

Odin picks up the papers and holds them away from his face, squinting through his bifocal monacle to make out the print.

"What's this say?"

Thor sighs impatiently. "Just sign it. The sooner you sign it you can get back to your *stories."*

Odin sets the papers down and peers up at him. “My son, have you something you wish to say to me?”

“Not at all,” Thor says nonchalantly. “It is not my business what you do with your vapid little lapdog.”

“Forgive me that my eye cannot see as well as it once did,” Odin snaps. “I am an old man. Loki at least has the compassion to offer assistance. He is good to me.”

“I *bet,*” Thor says under his breath, knowing his half-deaf father wouldn’t hear it. He takes another gulp of cognac. “You should not indulge him so. A wise overseer knows, spare the lash, spoil the slave.”

“Bah,” Odin waves his hand. “Don’t you have better things to concern yourself with, than the affectations of my little slave boy?”

“He’s blinded you.” Thor spits. “You let your emotions cloud your judgement.”

“And you, Thor? What about you and that girl you so favored last summer? Velia? And the next, Kore? Do not think yourself so high and noble. You are no more immune to a pretty face than I am. Now come, give me what else I have to sign, for I am tired, and have no energy for this nonsense.”

Thor slams the rest of the documents in front of his father. Soon enough, Thor thinks, he won’t need Odin’s signature at all. The thought is not as depressing as it once was.

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Thor’s not exactly sure what it is about Loki that grates at him so. Although Loki kneels and lowers his eyes when in Thor’s presence, there is still an air of haughtiness to him that is most unbecoming in a slave. Maybe it’s that he knows he’s utterly secure in Odin’s affections. Maybe it’s that he doesn’t seem to fear Thor, safe in the knowledge that he’s out of Thor’s reach. Or maybe Loki just *gets under Thor’s skin,* plain and simple.

“Ah, let the old man have his fun,” Volstagg laughs, clapping Thor on the shoulder. “Look at him. He hasn’t been this perked up in years.”

And, Thor hates to admit, it’s true: Odin has been smiling for the first time in recent memory, beaming at Loki in a way that Thor can only ever remember experiencing in his youth.

Loki slinks into the middle of the floor with sly, haughty smile plastered on his face, as though he weren’t just another replaceable slave from one of the backwards outer Realms. Loki bows emphatically at his master, then strikes a pose as he waits for the music to begin.

The zither starts first, and Loki begins to untangle himself from his veils, slowly revealing bits of pale flesh. A shoulder, a flash of green eyes. Loki unwraps himself like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, then flares the veils as the music begins to pulse.

Thor watches the little Jotun dancer, and despite himself, is absolutely mesmerized. Loki has a certain flair to him that naturally draws the eye, made worse by his flimsy silk shifts and gold bangles he always wears.

In a flurry of movement, Loki rids himself of the veils, then rises up on the ball of one foot and spins, twirling in tune with the beat and finishing with a high kick. He runs, does a graceful flip and lands effortlessly, his hair flowing wildly behind him. Thor has never seen anything like it, and is certain no one else at court has either. The crowd is absolutely silent.

The music becomes more frantic and Loki picks up speed, throwing himself to the ground and spreading his legs in the air. The rhythm booms, faster and faster, until Loki is a near blur, spinning and spinning, until the final crash of the drum, and Loki drops to the ground.

There is silence, at first, and then the crowd erupts into wild applause.

Loki picks himself off the floor, panting, and even from his dias Thor can see that familiar smug curl of his lips. Thor’s awed face melts back into a scowl.

“Wonderful!” Odin exclaims, clapping wildly. “Wonderful, Loki my sweet.”

Odin motions for Loki to approach the throne, and Loki does, purposefully rolling his hips with each step. His skin sheens with sweat, but his eyes are bright.

Odin receives him warmly, smiling down at him as Loki kneels to the ground to kiss Odin's robe. Then, in one swift move, Loki climbs up into Odin's lap, something which clearly pleases the aging king immensely.

"It's disgusting," Thor mutters under his breath. "He's panting after the minx like some soldier who's been on campaign for too many months."

"Come now Thor, would you object if you had that writhing in your lap?" Volstagg laughs, nodding to where Loki is pretty much doing just that. Odin dangles some jewel on a chain in front of Loki's face and Loki grins broadly in return, sweeping his hair to one side so Odin can clasp it behind his delicate neck. "He's just looking for a spot of fun; it's not like he's going to replace -"

"Don't you dare say it!' Thor snaps. "This isn't - this isn't about that at all! It's not that he's taken to some concubine. It's just that it had to be *that one.* "

Loki whispers something into Odin's ear and Odin laughs, caressing his back, the tips of his fingertips just barely grazing the pale thigh underneath Loki's shift. Loki grins, his eyes flicking to Thor for just the briefest moment, before turning back to his master.

"*See?* Did you see that?! Brazen little hussy!"

Volstagg merely laughs. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were jealous."

"I bed slaves like Loki every night. Even more beautiful than that, even. Loki's kind are as common as alley cats." He pauses, then adds, "And probably just as disease ridden."

Volstagg waggles his eyebrows with a loose shrug, then excuses himself for a piss.

Thor folds his hands over his chest, scowling. If that creature thinks he can best Thor, he will soon find himself sorely mistaken.

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Thor manages to avoid both his father and Loki for the rest of the week. His father's approval is only needed on the most important documents, so Thor's signature suffices on most decrees. Thor buys a new concubine; he deserves it, after all, after everything he's been through the last few months. A eunuch boy with long hair. Thor tries not to dwell on whether his choice holds some deeper, psychological significance. It's *not at all the same,* Thor tells himself, because the boy is appropriately humble in Thor's presence, never once meeting his master's eyes and laying still as Thor fucks him. Just the way Thor likes.

Yes, indeed.

Just the way Thor likes.

Alright, Thor is as frustrated as ever. But he'd never let on the reason why.

Within a fortnight, Thor has accumulated a collection of decrees that require his father's approval, and although Thor could send someone on his behalf to have them signed, Thor would rather suffer through gritted teeth and blue balls than let some black haired siren get the best of him. Who is the Crown Prince around here? Loki should be avoiding him, not the other way around!

Thor storms into his father's chambers, and is unsurprised to find Loki there, mending some article of clothing on a couch.

"You," Thor says gruffly, already irritated.

Loki immediately sets his sewing aside and slides from his seat, kneeling deeply, his unbound hair cascading down like a veil of satin. Thor has a sudden craving to touch it, to see if it is as soft as it looks.

"Where is the King?"

"Asleep, my prince," Loki replies softly, rising to his feet but keeping his eyes low. He's learned that much, at least.

Thor grunts. Looks like he won't get his papers signed until tomorrow; he would not dare waking Odin when he is in such desperate need of rest. He put this off for too long. His advisors will not be impressed come tomorrow morning. Ah well. Doesn't mean he can't toy with Odin's pet while

he’s here.

“My father has long suffered bouts of insomnia, which none of my healers were ever able to alleviate. What do you do, little runtling, to put him to sleep?”

“I read to him.” Loki replies.

“Of course. And what else?”

Loki blinks innocently. “That is all, my lord.”

At this, Thor face breaks out into a wild grin, and he begins to laugh uncontrollably.

“Ah, Loki,” he says, still chuckling. “Still clinging to that old story, eh? I must commend you, for never have I met someone who was either so stupid or so courageous as to lie to the Crown Prince’s face.”

“It’s the truth, your highness.”

“Right.” Thor says, his smiling face quickly melting back into a sneer. “You must think me a fool, if you expect me to believe that.”

Thor approaches Loki slowly, like a great stalking cat, but still Loki does not back down.

“Nubile thing like you at his beck and call?” Thor says lowly into Loki’s ear, tugging gently at Loki’s sleeve to expose a sliver of pale shoulder. “So young, so eager… ”

Thor licks his lips. This close, he can smell Loki: of sandalwood and roses and something much muskier underneath.

“I was watching you perform your little dance,” Thor breathes hotly. “Twirling, rocking your hips, spreading your legs. You like that, hm? You like being the centre of attention? Brazen slut,” Thor goes on viciously, “I bet you couldn’t wait to climb into his bed at night.”

“He’s lonely,” Loki says, and Thor recoils, searching Loki’s face for some jest or exaggeration and finding none. Odin is the much beloved King of Asgard; he is surrounded by servants and courtiers all day! He couldn’t possibly…

“He’s lonely and I keep him company,” Loki repeats.

“I’m sure you do,” Thor says, quickly gathering himself. “Mend his shirts too, like a little housewife.”

Loki sighs, as though he were speaking to a dull child. “I told you, I’m his attendant.”

“You’re like no attendant I’ve ever seen, in your pretty little white shifts,” Thor grabs Loki’s braceleted wrist, “And pretty little jewels….”

Thor’s voice trails off, and his brow furrows. The cuff looks familiar - embossed gold, embellished with emeralds and pearls. *Too* familiar.

“Where did you get that?” Thor whispers.

Loki visibly startles at the sudden change in Thor’s tone, then looks down nervously at the gold cuff. He manages to wrench his arm from Thor’s grasp, and he rubs his wrist, as though Thor had maybe gripped him too tightly.

“Where did you get that?” Thor repeats. “Did you steal it, you little thief?”

“No -” Loki stammers. “No, your Highness -”

“Then what?” Thor advances until he’s crowded Loki against the wall and trapped him between his sturdy arms. Loki’s eyes finally widen with fear, and Thor triumphs in it. It’s about time Loki showed him due respect and deference.

“Did you steal it? Do you even know what that is?! Answer me!” Thor roars, punching the wall

next to Loki's head. Loki cowers in the face of Thor's temper. Finally, that smug little glint has been extinguished from his eyes, and Thor sees something raw and vulnerable underneath. Thor relishes it. For a moment, Thor forgets the purpose of his tirade, and instead envisions little Loki, meek and submissive, as Thor crawls atop him.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Thor turns at the familiar authoritative voice, and while he is distracted, Loki takes the opportunity to slip out from underneath Thor's arms and into the safety of the Allfather's embrace.

Odin clasps his arms around Loki protectively, stroking his hair, and for a second Thor isn't sure which of them he's more jealous of.

"Thor, what is the meaning of this?"

"He is wearing Mother's cuff!" Thor exclaims.

"Yes, I know, I gave it to him." Odin says firmly, clasping Loki's trembling form. He coos at Loki, "Hush, my dove."

"You *gave it to him?!"* Thor repeats, horrified. "My mother's jewels?! MY mother's jewels?!"

"They are mine to give!" Odin barks. "It is a waste for them to be sitting in a dark vault, unused, unappreciated. What else are jewels for, if not to be worn and enjoyed? Come now Thor, you are acting like a petty child."

"I am not!" Thor says petulantly. "Are you so blinded by your lust, you forget your dead wife so readily?"

"How dare you even suggest I'd forget my wife," Odin says. "Impudent boy! I have mourned her for ten years. I have shed my tears. Let me have this. Let an old man take comfort where he can." Loki murmurs something at Odin, and Odin shushes him gently, "I know, Loki. Hush. I know. It's not your fault, my sweet."

Loki peeks out from under Odin's embrace, and although his hands are covering half his face, Thor could *swear* he's grinning. That *whore.* That little whore!

"I will not see my mother's jewels on that slut!"

"You watch your tongue," Odin says in warning. "Loki is my slave, and these are my jewels, and while I am King, I will do with him what I like."

"Fine," Thor hisses, overturning a nearby sidetable. "Fine, you senile old man. Do what you will, dote on your pet. I care not."

Thor storms out, before he witnesses any more. He's livid, utterly enraged, and can already feel a storm brewing outside. He's also still somewhat hard, which is never a good combination.

That scheming rat. He's poisoning Odin's mind, somehow! That must be it. How else could he have so deeply wormed his way into the Allfather's affections?

Thor's pissy mood lasts all through the night and the next day; not even a very thorough fucking brings him any satisfaction. The problem, Thor realizes, is that he doesn't want any of his concubines, nor any of his slaves. Not even the most seasoned brothel whore could bring him any relief. There is only one thing that will scratch his itch, and Thor can't have it.

Thor departs to Vanaheim to attend the bicentennial of their Queen's reign, and can barely muster any enthusiasm at all for the feasting.

Strange how fate sometimes works, because just as Thor's ire reaches near unfathomable proportions, a messenger from Asgard arrives with urgent news: the Allfather has unexpectedly fallen into the Odinsleep. Thor is appropriately grim in public, but as soon as he's alone, a toothy grin nearly cracks his face.

This time, it is Odin's last. This time, Thor will be crowned King of Asgard.

And that means Loki is *his.*

Chapter 2

Loki stands in front of the mirror in Odin's sitting room, staring at his own reflection. He reaches out and strokes the glass with the tips of his fingertips, dragging them down and up in a practised pattern until the surface of the glass begins to frost over. The frost spreads, coating the mirror, until it's entirely frozen. Loki hastily looks over his shoulder. He should have been more careful to clear the room before casting the spell. If he were caught using magic…

Loki waits, cracking his knuckles anxiously.

"Come on," he whispers under his breath. "Come on."

It takes a few minutes to connect, but then the familiar blue face of his brother materializes in the icy surface.

"Open the gateway," Loki says immediately, without preamble. They never cared much for pleasantries, anyway.

"Loki," Helblindi growls, happy to see him as ever. "Why do you summon me now? I told you last time, the call should only be used for emergencies. You know this."

"This *is* an emergency. The mission has been compromised. You have to get me out of Asgard."

Helblindi's face darkens. "What did you do?"

"Nothing!" Loki says defensively, running his hands through his hair in a vain attempt to compose himself. "It was going perfectly well until….Odin has fallen into the Odinsleep."

At this, Helblindi pauses. "Really?" he says, stroking the raised lines on his jaw. "How long?"

"A few hours, at most. It hasn't yet been announced publicly."

"Hmmmm. That is certainly unexpected. Thought for sure he'd have another fifteen, twenty years

in him. How unfortunate for you."

"Yes, well," Loki laughs darkly, "I can't proceed like this. I need you to open your gateway. I need to get out of Asgard. *Now."*

"Impossible, I'm afraid." Helblindi replies. "The risk is too great. With Odin asleep, everything will be uprooted. People are watching. I should not even be speaking to you now, and your sudden disappearance would be a cause of great suspicion. Why are you acting so shocked? You knew this was a possibility when you left."

"You don't understand," Loki hisses, "I can't be here when Thor returns. I *can't."*

"Ahhhh," Helblindi says, red eyes glinting. "Made enemies, have you? You always were careless. Brilliant, but careless. I knew you would be your own undoing."

"I was close. Helblindi, please. I almost had it - *"*

Helblindi is unmoved. "What good is that to me? *Almost?* Laufey will not accept failure, and we have already given you ample time to complete your quest. The mission goes on as planned, with the change of target. You'll just have to use your considerable charms on the new king. If the rumors about him are true, I'm sure he'll be more than receptive. And if not - " Helblindi shrugs, "Perhaps a lifetime of servitude in Asgard will teach you some restraint."

"No! No, please! Helblindi!"

"Best of luck, brother. Do not call me again, until you have succeeded."

Loki opens his mouth to protest, but the vision is already gone.

Loki nearly sobs.

He is fucked.

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Odin leans heavily on Loki's shoulder as Loki helps him up the stairs. He groans, visibly winded from the minimal exertion. It's amazing, really, that the most feared, most powerful god in all the Realms has been reduced to this - and that the person he relies on most is nothing but a enslaved Jotunn runt.

"One more," Loki encourages gently. "There we are."

At length, they manage to shuffle to their cavernous bedchamber. Loki helps Odin sit on the edge of his bed, and doesn't miss the weary, thankful look Odin shoots him. Loki immediately crouches down to unlace Odin's boots and is unsurprised to feel Odin's fingers carding through his hair.

"Ah, Loki," Odin says reverently. "Poor child, I stole you from the feast too early. You should be dancing and celebrating all night. Savor your youth, before you become an old fart like me."

"I don't mind," Loki says, pulling off one boot and looking up at his master through his eyelashes. "I like the quiet."

Odin smiles sadly.

"It's Thor, isn't it," Odin's face is grim, "I could see you sneaking fleeting glances at him. He can be a bit….brash, I know. I am sorry he frightened you so. He won't trouble you again, I swear it."

Loki shrugs. "He misses his mother. I don't blame him for reacting the way he did."

Odin nods at this, more solemn than ever. Loki begins to untie the second boot.

"I want you to be happy," Odin says at length. His eyebrows knot, "Are you happy here with me, Loki?"

Loki startles a bit, unprepared for that question. He schools his face, and the lie slips out as effortlessly and as convincingly as if he'd been rehearsing it for weeks.

“Of course I’m happy. Are you happy?”

“Yes, child,” Odin says, but his voice cracks.

Loki pulls the second boot off and keeps Odin’s socked foot in his lap. He begins to rub Odin’s feet, applying pressure in just the way he knows Odin likes. It’s not the most pleasant of his duties, but there are certainly worse things Odin could have him do. Odin groans appreciatively, and after a few minutes of this, Loki takes the other foot in his hands and repeats the process.

Next, Loki rises to fix the Allfather’s sleep tonic. As he stirs it, he secretly infuses the liquid with a cough suppressant spell to keep Odin from hacking all night. He doesn’t want to be kept up, either.

“Here,” Loki says, handing the glass of cloudy liquid to Odin. Odin takes it unquestioningly and drinks it down, utterly secure in his trust for his slave. Loki imagines how easy it would be to slip a vial of poison into the drink and escape into the night before he was discovered. That thought fills him with no pleasure, but nor would Loki hesitate if that’s what it came down to. There is no room in Loki’s cold, dark heart for sentiment.

Odin sputters a bit, but the spell does the trick, and not a single cough escapes his throat.

Loki changes Odin into his nightgown next, keeping his movements efficient yet gentle, and not letting his eyes linger on the haggard, withered form beneath. Odin’s skin is a battleground of scars; indexical marks of the many injuries he’d sustained during his time as a great warrior. He has an impressive looking gouge underneath his left rib - it’s said to be a dragon bite, but Loki’s never mustered the nerve to ask about it. In any case, Loki knows that Odin is uncomfortable in any state of undress, so he does not tarry, and quickly slips his nightgown over his shoulders.

Odin eases himself down, tucking his legs under the bedspread.

“Read to me, sweetheart?”

Loki smiles. “Of course. What would you like?”

“Oh, I don’t care,” Odin says with a sigh. “You choose tonight.”

Loki nods and pads over to the bookshelf, skimming over the leather bound tomes, although this is just for show: he knows which one he is going to pick.

Loki swallows dryly, calculating whether or not tonight might be the night. He shouldn't hold off for any longer; Laufey must be losing patience by now. But nor would it have been wise to be reckless, and push forward with this before he'd established enough trust. But tonight feels right. It could be his chance.

Loki makes his selection and returns to the bed. Odin opens his arm and Loki obediently climbs in, nestling himself at Odin's side. Having to sleep with Odin had disgusted him at first, but he'd grown to not mind it so much as the weeks and months wore on. It soon became clear that Odin either would not or could not fuck him, although Loki had certainly mentally prepared himself for that eventuality. No, Odin seems to look on Loki like a little doll: he likes to hold him, choose his clothes, give him jewels, and occasionally kiss his cheek, but not much more. Every once in awhile, he watches Loki bathe, but even then, Loki feels he's being admired like a work of art rather than as a pleasure slave. There is no heat to Odin's gaze, no hunger or cruelty; only a profound, unrelenting sadness that seems to permeate every aspect of his being. He's a lonely old man. If Loki had half a heart, he might've felt bad for him. It'd be pathetic if it weren't so…sad.

Odin breathes in deeply as Loki lays his head on his arm. Loki had perfumed his hair with the scent Odin liked best.

"Let's see," Loki says, flipping through the pages. "Where were we…"

Odin rumbles contentedly next to him. Half the time, he doesn't even seem to be listening, and is content just to let the cadence of Loki's voice lull him to sleep. Loki needs his attention for this, though. Sometimes he gets in a mood, as old men tend to do, where he likes to yak at Loki about his adventures and conquests, reliving his youth, his one eye wistful and nostalgic. His stories have been becoming repetitive lately, like he can't remember having told them to Loki before. Loki needs to get him talking, and if he doesn't remember this come morning, all the better.

"A brief history of Midgard," Loki begins, keeping his voice even. Odin grunts next to him, shifting slightly, but otherwise stays silent.

Loki starts to recite the tome aloud, beginning with the realm's creation 4.54 billion years ago, through to the origin of life, the evolution of living creatures and the development of Midgardian civilization. The book is written like an ethnographical report, detailing the different Midgardian peoples and their accomplishments; the rise and fall of their petty, short-lived empires, their inventions and ideas. Loki had already read through this book many times over while the Allfather

slept, but he keeps his voice lively and interested. Loki is nothing if not an expert storyteller.

Loki skips over unimportant bits, but at length, he gets part he'd been waiting for.

"The invasion of Midgard," Loki says, "By the King of the Frost Giants, Laufey of Jotunheim, was the first known direct involvement of outer beings in Midgardian affairs. In the northern region of Midgard known as Scandinavia, Jotunheim's armies were met by a counterforce comprising of Aesir and Vanir, led by King Odin of Asgard, the Great, the Just, the One-Eyed……"

"Do you remember that?" Loki prompts.

Odin makes a snoring sound, as if he'd just been jolted awake. "Hmmm?"

"Am I boring you?" Loki teases gently, putting on a mock-insulted face, just to involve Odin and maybe wake him up a bit. "With your own history, no less…."

"No, no my dear," Odin says sleepily. He rubs his empty, scarred eye socket. "What was that?"

"I was just wondering if you remembered," Loki says, stroking the illuminated vellum, which depicted a much younger, much stronger Allfather crushing three Jotunn under a blast of golden magic. "That battle."

"On Midgard? Of course! It was the decisive victory in the War, when I pushed Jotunheim's hordes back to their icy realm….." He scratches his belly and mumbles, "....How I came to acquire the Casket of Ancient Winters…"

A knot of adrenaline pulses in Loki's stomach. "What was it like?"

"Ah, sweetling. I should not speak of it."

"Why not?" Loki presses. "Because of what I am?"

"I would not want to….upset you."

“Come on,” Loki whines, setting aside the book. “You know I hold no allegiance to my kindred. Tell me. I want to hear about it.”

“You will think me cruel.” Odin says.

Loki sits up, turning to face the king. With all the sincerity of a seasoned actor, Loki says, “In what universe could I ever find you cruel, after all you have done for me?” Loki takes Odin’s hand and brings it to his cheek, then presses a kiss to his inner palm.

“Ah, darling boy,” Odin says, “My beautiful treasure. Perhaps some other time, for I fear I shall fall asleep before I finish the tale.”

Loki frowns inwardly. He doesn’t know when again he’ll get the chance to bring this up, and is hesitant to let go of this opportunity. Loki lays back down, as if in obedience, but the wheels in his mind whirl almost uncontrollably.

“I can’t imagine what the Nine Realms would have been like, if you hadn’t been there to stop Laufey. What kind of tyranny we’d be living under….”

Odin grunts in response. Loki is not even really sure if he's listening.

“I know little of my people,” Loki says thoughtfully. “I don’t remember my dam, and only vaguely of my sire. The only Jotunn I ever met were the ones who sold me into slavery, and they were not merciful to me….”

Odin’s one eye cracks open a sliver, and he gives Loki a weak squeeze. “You are nothing like them, Loki.”

“I know, but I worry sometimes,” Loki goes on, “About what would happen if they ever did come to power…..if I ever fell into their hands. To be a runt in Jotunheim, they say, is to be truly cursed.”

“Impossible,” Odin says. “You are safe here, with me. Jotunheim is impotent, fallen into ruin since they lost the Casket.”

“And that’s the way it will stay?” He makes his voice small and childlike. “They won’t…..they won’t ever get it back?”

“Ah, do not fret, my dove,” Odin says. His eyes aren’t even open anymore. “I have secreted the Casket away to a hidden place, where it is safe, and forever out of Jotunn hands.”

Loki’s heart thumps.

“A hidden place?” he gently prods.

“Aye,” Odin says groggily. The sleep tonic is taking hold, and soon he will be unable to resist its effects. “Far, far away from here…”

“Where?” Loki whispers.

It’s a risk, he knows, to be so forthright. But it’s a calculated one: Odin is near comatose, drugged, and vulnerable. The perfect time to strike.

Loki holds his breath.

Odin rumbles softly. “....Moon….of..”

This is it. This is all he needs. Just one answer and he can finally, finally go home.

“Moon of what?” Loki whispers urgently. “Tell me.”

Odin makes another snore-like noise.

“Tell me,” Loki repeats, almost frantically. “Tell me!”

But Loki can see it's futile; the Allfather is lost to him, sound asleep. Loki could bash the old man's head in out of frustration. He'd been close. He'd been so close!

Loki seethes, but forces himself to lie still at Odin's side. His mind spins, and he doesn't sleep.

***

The Allfather rests through the night, snoring softly, and all through the next morning. Loki manages to peel himself out from underneath his arm to go to the washroom, but dutifully crawls back into bed once he's relieved himself. Like a lapdog, he has to wait for Odin to rise before he can as well.

Except he doesn't. Odin sleeps away, utterly at peace, hour after hour. Loki gives up on waiting and reads a bit, then takes a bath. He emerges some time later to find not only that Odin hadn't yet awoken, but also that he hadn't even moved. He'd look almost dead if it weren't for the steady rise and fall of his chest.

A knot of worry begins to form in Loki's stomach. He crawls onto their bed and kneels next to the king's sleeping form. "Allfather?" he hazards, laying a hand on Odin's shoulder. The old man doesn't rouse, so Loki tries again. He gives him a gentle shake. "It's almost midday. It's time to rise. Allfather?"

Nothing. Loki shakes him harder. His voice is shrill in his ears, "Master?"

Still nothing. Odin is utterly unresponsive. With horror, Loki realizes this isn't a normal sleep.

"Wake up," Loki pleads. He shakes the king's shoulders violently now. "Wake up, wake up!"

As soon as Loki releases him, the king flops back down on his pillow, unconscious. It can only mean one thing -

Loki feels his throat constrict. This can't be happening. Not now. Not when he'd been so close!

Loki sits back on his heels, swallowing down the mounting panic. He has to call Helblindi. There's

no other choice. He has to get out of here.

***

Loki watches, bleary-eyed, as Odin's personal effects are carefully moved out of the Imperial Bedchamber to make room for the new inhabitant. Loki feels out of place and strangely useless. With the Allfather asleep, he hasn't anything to do, no duties to perform - even if all he ever did was sit on Odin's lap and repeat things into his ear when courtiers spoke too quietly for him to hear. No one seems to know what to do with him, either. He gets some wary, side-eyed glances from the servants, but is otherwise left alone. Loki doesn't even have a place to sleep anymore: he'd slept next to Odin since the first night he'd arrived in Asgard. Loki spends most of the day huddled on a couch in the sitting room, willing himself not to cry.

Sometimes Loki goes to Odin's bedside, acting the dutiful slave, but staring at nothing. It helps to look appropriately sad and mournful. And in a way, Loki is - just not in the way the Asgardians think. Loki's whole existence led up to that moment. He'd gone through *so much.* He'd endured untold humiliation, exhibited more restraint and patience than he thought himself capable. Years and years of planning and meticulous execution. And for what?

He's stranded here. He has no friends, no allies, no protection. His own family has abandoned him.

Loki doesn't like not being in control of things. Even as Odin's dancing pet he always had some handle on his own fate. He'd become skilled in whispering suggestions in Odin's ear, and twisting his words so that the senile old man thought he came up with the ideas himself. Now, everything is so uncertain. Loki considers making an escape, but vetoes the idea just as quickly. He can't teleport without having someone to open a wormhole on the other side, so going home is out of the question. He might be able to use his illusion magic to sneak out of Asgard, but even then, where would he go? He'd never be able to set foot in Jotunheim if he abandoned his post against Laufey's direct order. He'd be disgraced. They'd call him coward, deserter. He'd be stoned, and refused cremation.

Loki shakes violently. He's no fool: he saw the hunger with which Thor looked at him. His days of chaste servitude are numbered. The thought of lying with Thor fills Loki with terror. He's not going to be shown a shred of mercy, he knows it. Thor could make him perform all kinds of unspeakable degrading acts. Thor would probably enjoy being rough with him, making him cry, making him plead.

But Loki is not without his defenses. He has a sly tongue, a crafty mind. What Loki should do, is try to delay the inevitable. If he could get Thor to feel some affection for him before their first coupling, perhaps Thor won't be cruel with him. How to hold him off, Loki doesn't yet know. He will have to think of something.

He will salvage his mission as best as he can, and start over with the new king.

He can do this. He will survive.

***

The days pass as the palace rearranges itself in the wake of the Allfather's Odinsleep. It's his last, Loki hears the attendants saying. This time Thor will be crowned king, as soon as he returns from Vanaheim and the appropriate arrangements are made. Loki tucks himself out of the way so that hopefully no one will kick him out of the Imperial suite. Loki has nowhere else to go.

So, Loki stays in the rooms he'd once shared with Odin and waits, speaking to no one, rendering himself as inconspicuous and as unobtrusive as possible. He soon becomes restless, and decides to try and expel some of his nervous energy through movement. He stretches on the floor and shakes out his limbs, and yes, it does make him feel a bit better. Eventually, he works up the nerve to practice his dancing. Odin had cleared a small area in the corner of his apartments and set up a wall of mirrors for this express purpose. Dance makes Loki feel strong and agile - like a warrior of sorts, even powerful, although he knows he's a fool for finding them in any way comparable. Loki has no music so he hums an old Jotun tune in his head.

It's a dance he'd learned before, long ago, but the movements come back to him as though his body were on autopilot. He imagines himself back home, in the Sanctuary with its mirrors of ice, and his old master Angrboda, who'd hurl correction after correction with nary a word of praise. He remembers what it was like to see his blue self in the mirror, rather than his pale Aesir form. At least then he'd felt somewhat safe. Protected. Even happy, in a way.

Loki sets up, then pushes off into a pump turn, using one leg to propel himself around and spotting his reflection in the mirror. One, two, three, four rotations. Loki's balance is impeccable; his posture exemplary. Five, six. Loki is in his element. This is what made him Angrboda's top apprentice, the envy of every other student at the Sanctuary - seven, eight - the most beautiful, most desired runt in all of Jotunheim. Nine, ten. The only one capable for the mission that was entrusted to him -

A familiar blond head materializes in the mirror, and for the first time in a long time, Loki falters, stumbling out of his turn. Loki winces at a brief flash of pain, having landed on his ankle at an odd angle. He manages to keep himself from falling, at least.

“I did not mean to interrupt,” Thor drawls, leaning on the doorframe and taking a bite out of an apple. “You were doing so well.”

Loki rights himself almost immediately, and swallows down the sudden surge of terror in his gut. He schools his features to neutrality, then gracefully slides down to the ground in a kneeling position. He didn’t even know Thor was back in Asgard yet. He was expecting more...fanfare. He shouldn’t have let himself be distracted. Loki does not appreciate being caught off guard like that.

How long had he been standing there?

“My King,” Loki greets, rising back up to his feet.

“Not king yet,” Thor says, chewing on his apple and strolling over leisurely. “I still have to have my coronation ceremony. But the word does sound *so lovely* coming from your lips.”

Thor flops down in a nearby armchair with a mighty oomph. A huge self-satisfied grin nearly cracks his face.

“Well, don’t mind me,” Thor raises his eyebrows expectantly. He waves his hand, “Please, continue.”

Loki is still so shocked at Thor’s sudden entrance that the order doesn’t quite register at first. When it does, Loki finds himself rather at a loss; his feet turned to lead.

“Come on, Loki,” Thor encourages cheerfully, speaking as one would to a dog. “Come on. Twirl for me.”

Loki clenches his jaw. He knows Thor is just trying to get under his skin. He’s playing with him, as a cat would with a mouse before it devours it whole.

Thor raises a finger in the air and makes a circling motion, eyes twinkling gleefully. “Twirl,” he mouths.

Well, fine. He wants Loki to twirl? Loki’s going to fucking *twirl.*

Steeling himself, Loki sets up, just as he was taught, then swings his leg around to propel the first rotation. One, two, three. Loki spots on Thor's face. In his head, this makes him feel like he's fighting back somehow, challenging Thor's authority, *beating him*. Loki's mental stability depends on his ability to craft little delusions like this.

Four, five, six. The room is a blur, and even the brief moments he fixes on Thor's face are hazy and unclear. He knows what he looks like, however. Loki knows he's beautiful. He could fell any man he was set upon. He will bring Thor down, and he will do it just like this.

Loki loses count of his spins now. He must be in the teens, and still he turns, again and again, raising on the ball of his foot each time. He attacks it as though it were a punishment, faster and faster, pouring his frustration into every swing of his leg.

Loki feels his weight bearing leg begin to shake, and he knows he won't be able to carry on for much longer. Loki prepares himself, then flawlessly transitions into three high-speed rotations on one foot before finishing with a perfect, clean stop.

He blinks a few times until Thor slowly comes into focus. Thor's shit-eating grin had dimmed considerably; his half-eaten apple hangs from one hand, seemingly forgotten.

Loki can't help tilting his chin up, just a tiny bit.

"Impressive," Thor says. "Now where did you learn to do that?"

"It is tradition for runts to be trained as dancers. My first master thought it would be a good investment. He knew he'd make more coin - and secure me a better future." Loki shrugs. "I enjoy it."

Thor's eyes skim over Loki's body as he strokes his beard. "I think I'll have you dance at my coronation ceremony. Yes. That would be most suitable. It will give you an opportunity to…" Thor's grin returns, brighter than ever, "....express your joy."

"It would be an honor," Loki grits out.

“Excellent!” Thor claps his hands. He rises and stalks over to Loki. Thor’s smile melts into something darker, more predatory, and Loki fights the urge to back away. Loki had forgotten just how imposing Thor is. The victory he’d claimed mere moments ago feels very far away.

Thor brushes a few strands of Loki’s hair back away from his face. “You’re going to be my good little dancer, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Loki says, because what else is there to say? His heart hammers in his chest; Thor is so close, towering over him and radiating heat.

Thor hums, his hand skimming over Loki’s face, until his thumb comes to rest over Loki’s bottom lip. “You’re going to *dance,* just for me?”

Loki freezes, swallowing nervously, and looking anywhere but at Thor’s face. He hadn’t missed the suggestion in his tone.

“Yes,” Loki says, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Yes what?”

“Yes, master,” Loki says miserably.

Thor’s grin will probably swallow his whole face, at this rate. And Loki *hates* him, for making him feel this way - so small. Weak.

Thor toys with his lip for a moment, pressing the tip of his thumb just inside Loki’s mouth. Loki pants hotly on Thor’s fingers and waits for it to be over. His entire body tenses, but Thor only pulls back, straightening up and collecting himself. Loki lets out the breath he hadn’t known he was holding.

“I’ll send for some musicians so you can begin rehearsing,” Thor says. His voice seems to have gotten deeper. “For my coronation, I expect the best.”

Loki nods, and with that, Thor turns on his heels. In a whirl of red fabric, he is gone.

Loki sinks down to the ground, his arms wrapped protectively around himself, and wills his thumping heart down to a normal rate. He is so, *so fucked.*

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> I wish I wasn't one of those authors who goes bananas over every single comment and kudos and tumblr ask. But I do. I fucking love when people are enthusiastic about my stupid fics, because I'm vain and shallow like that.

Rehearsals for the coronation begin immediately. Loki finds himself amongst a veritable sea of dancers, acrobats, magicians and entertainers who are likewise scheduled to perform. Rehearsals are long and intense. They use the palace gymnasium for this purpose, which at least affords Loki space to practice his acrobatics and tumbling. The Dance Mistress issues him a bed in the general dormitory, which Loki is grateful for. He is safe amongst his fellow Asgardian, Vanir and Elvish dancers, most of whom are female. They are well-guarded at night, and Loki is able to relax enough to get some sleep, at last.

Loki works and reworks his choreography incessantly under the Dance Mistress' watchful eyes. Loki is a perfectionist; sections he'd been pleased with the day before suddenly seem aggravatingly subpar the morning after. It has to be perfect. If he wants to survive, he's got to play Thor's game. He can do this. He was the star of the Sanctuary, Angrboda's favourite. And if he could dance to that thorny old fart's satisfaction, then he should have no trouble with these snobs.

At least the music he'd chosen was approved by the planning committee; gods forbid he'd have to dance to some awful Asgardian trumpet piece.

A page interrupts their rehearsals one evening.

"You are summoned," he says simply, in a tone that leaves no room for argument.

The girls titter around him excitedly, but Loki just closes his eyes and exhales. Goody. Thor is probably looking to toy with him some more.

Loki quickly changes into his usual dress, smoothes out his hair, and follows the page up towards the Imperial Suite: the rooms he'd once shared with the Allfather. They look different already, having been redecorated with Thor's colors and insignia. What used to be familiar now all seems strange and foreign. Threatening.

He's led into the dining room, used for when the King wishes to entertain very intimate guests. Thor is there at the table, before him a veritable banquet of tantalizing and exotic dishes. Loki's stomach rumbles at the sight. Now that he's stopped dancing, he's got nothing to distract him from his gnawing hunger.

"Ah, Loki," Thor smiles.

Loki approaches and kneels all the way to the ground, then back up again.

"Highness."

"I was wondering how my dance is coming," Thor says idly, chewing on a drumstick. His lips glisten with grease, and Loki's tummy churns with envy. "They tell me you're working very hard on it. My musicians' fingertips are callused from practice."

"My only wish is to honour your name."

It sounds so transparent even to his own ears. Thor merely laughs.

"Such honeyed words! You make my sweetmeats seem like ash in comparison."

Thor snaps his fingers at his empty glass, motioning for Loki to refill it. Loki does, pouring the wine until Thor indicates for him to stop. Already Loki sees he's had a few drinks this night, and Loki raises his guard. Thor is unpredictable enough even without the benefit of alcohol.

"Now, this dance…I want something big. Something new and exciting. Something they haven't seen before."

"Did you have anything specific in mind, my lord?"

"Me? Norns, no. I leave such things to the creatively-inclined. I'm more of a warrior than an artist. I liked that tumbling you did, though," Thor says thoughtfully, swiping the grease off his lips with a smooth pass of his tongue. "And that flippy jump. You know. Run and flip sideways." Thor seems frustrated by his own inability to describe it. He makes a circle gesture with his fingers. "Just

do it. Let me see."

Loki clenches his jaw. He thinks he knows the jump Thor is referring to. Like a damned circus monkey, he must perform on command. And what a stupid command it is, given that this dining room is replete with highly breakable fine dinnerware. If Loki loses his footing and careens into the porcelain hutch he won't be held responsible.

Loki only needs a few paces to build momentum, launching off his back leg and flipping effortlessly in the air, then lands so softly there's only the slightest ripple in the wine in Thor's cup.

"Yeah," Thor says, clearing his throat slightly. "That's it. So, do that, and the tumbling, and whatever else. Just be beautiful. It shouldn't be hard for you."

Loki is taken aback. Did Thor just...compliment him?

"As you wish."

"You realize, of course, what a momentous occasion this is. I'll have the entirety of the Asgardian nobility there, as well as foreign dignitaries and sovereigns. I probably don't have to remind you about the consequences should you fail. I won't be made a fool of at my own coronation."

"It will be perfect," Loki assures him, raising his chin slightly, as if to meet Thor's challenge with a challenge of his own.

"Good," Thor murmurs. "Now then. I thought," Thor scoops gravy up with his bread and shoves it into his mouth, "Since my father kept you around to read to him - as you say - then perhaps I should sample your talents." Thor motions to the side table. "Over there."

Loki shuffles over to retrieve the book Thor had nodded to. He picks up the bound leather and frowns.

Jotnar: The Ice-Race of Jotunheim

Oh, how very amusing.

“Chapter eight,” Thor says and Loki flips to the appropriate page.

“Chapter eight. On the…Jotunn runt,” Loki begins shakily, suddenly nervous. He hazards a glance at Thor, who smiles at him encouragingly. Loki can already tell this book must be old, centuries old even. It is like some kind of bestiary, as though the race of Jotnar were little more than animals.

“Of all the creatures on Jotunheim, one of the least well known and studied is the Jotunn Runt -”

“Come on, speak up, put some life into it,” Thor interrupts, chewing noisily. “This is pertinent information, for you.”

Loki grits his teeth and starts over.

“Of all the creatures on Jotunheim, one of the least well known and studied is the Jotunn Runt. Recognizable by their short stature, the runt is known to occur in one in ten births, being exclusively second or third born...."

Loki pauses, looking up. Thor is staring back at him expectantly. “Continue.”

Loki does, rattling through old, mostly outdated information about his kind. It all feels very surreal, to be reading aloud about himself in this very detached, scientific way, and to the soon-to-be King of Asgard no less. Thor must think he’s very funny, to have dug this tome up from Norns knows where.

His mind wanders as he reads, as it is wont. After having spent so many hours reading aloud to Odin, Loki can do it almost automatically, without necessarily having to think about what he’s saying. It bothers him that this book clearly holds Jotunheim in such contempt. True, Asgard and Jotunheim have been enemies for centuries, but surely it can't be fair to paint all Jotnar as barbarians, as...as *creatures.* The Jotnar have as rich a culture as any other race, with their own cuisine, their own music, folk arts and traditions. Why, their mastery over the arts of seidr is comparable to that of the Elves! There is a wild, untamed beauty to his native Realm: in the snowy mountain peaks, the iceberg-crusted oceans, the windswept tundra. Loki was never terribly fond of his homeland but he'd be lying if he said he didn't miss it, just a little bit.

A diagram on the opposite side of the page catches the corner of Loki's eye. It depicts the average size difference between runts and normal Jotnar, showing the two side by side. The runt in the illustration reaches to the chest of its compatriot, which is more or less how tall Loki is compared to Helblindi, although some Frost Giants grow much taller, and some runts are much shorter. Loki remembers what it was like to realize that his growth spurt wasn't coming, that he was a runt, that he would be frozen in this body forever. He remembers his dreams of being a fierce warrior fading before his eyes. Then came the….incident. Helblindi packed him off to Angrboda shortly thereafter, and, well, there isn't much point in crying about it now.

"Well, do you?"

Thor's sharp voice cuts through his inner monologue. Loki startles out of his reverie and looks up, lost.

"Aren't you paying attention? And here I brought this book for your benefit!" Thor smirks, clearly amused. "Have body hair."

"Excuse me?" Loki says before he can catch himself. He feels a hot flush creep up the back of his neck. Thor just laughs.

Loki glances down and skims the paragraph he'd just read aloud, frowning at the subject matter. He really ought to have focused a bit more.

There's no point in lying; Thor could just strip him bare and find out for himself.

"No. I don't."

"None at all?" Thor's eyes flick briefly down Loki's body then back up again.

"No." Loki says, his jaw clenching. As an afterthought he adds, "Highness."

"Huh." Thor says. He runs his tongue over his teeth, then turns back to his food. "So you're like a permanently prepubescent Frost Giant."

“I suppose you could put it like that.”

There must have been a harsh, bitter edge to his tone, because Thor’s grin only widens.

“Well, all Jotunns go bald at puberty, don’t they?” Thor takes another bite of his drumstick. “Shed the hair on their heads, sprout horns, and grow an extra five feet…..? The only ones I’ve ever seen with hair like yours were younglings.”

“I don’t know,” Loki says.

“You don’t know?”

“I have been separated from my kind for almost as long as I can remember.”

“Huh,” Thor says again, clearly unsympathetic. He takes a large gulp of wine. “Well, it’s a good thing I found that book for you, then, isn’t it.”

“Yes, my lord.” Loki says flatly. “Thank you.”

“Although, to be honest, I’m not sure why my father had you read to him. That was a bit dry for my taste. But I’m sure you have other skills to make you worth your keep. Don’t you, Loki.”

Thor sets his cutlery down over his cleared plate and grunts in satisfaction. He reclines, scratching his bulging stomach, and fixes his stormy eyes on Loki, suddenly very intent.

“What did you do, to make him love you so?”

Loki’s eyes flick up for a moment, then back down again. He shifts under Thor’s gaze, unsure if the question is rhetorical or if Thor is actually expecting an answer.

“I…cared for him,” Loki says at length, then stops. Thor is watching him carefully, as if to try and extract more information, but Loki has nothing else to say about it.

“You sat with him,” Thor begins slowly, “Whispered in his ear, leaned into his touch. You were his crutch and his confidante. You accepted his gifts and the privileges he conferred upon you. You went to bed with him every single night. And I ask you, Loki,” Thor pauses, seemingly for effect, “Do you think I am a fool?”

There is no way to convince Thor of the truth of his and Odin’s relationship. Loki’s not even sure if it’d be in his best interest to do so. If he said he had slept with the Allfather, Thor might very well dispose of him like a half-chewed piece of candy. And if he denied it, well. Thor would just call him a liar.

“Believe what you want,” Loki says softly. “He was a lonely old man.”

Thor sits back, contemplative, and it occurs to Loki that this might not have been something he'd considered before.

“He never stopped loving your mother,” Loki ventures.

Thor’s eyes instantly darken. “Don’t you dare speak about my mother,” he snarls. “You don’t know anything about her.”

Loki mumbles an apology, and looks away. Mental note: Thor is touchy about his mother.

“You are nothing but a replaceable whore,” Thor goes on bitingly. “There are a thousand more just like you waiting to take your place. There was only one Queen of Asgard.”

Loki ducks his head and apologizes again. It is true. It’s always been true. There is no one in all the Realms who would miss him if he were gone. Whatever affection the Allfather had for him may have been built on a lie, but at least he might’ve cared if Loki were thrown off the Rainbow Bridge and into oblivion.

They fall into silence for a long while, Thor’s temper still inflamed, stifling, looming over Loki’s head like a dark cloud. Loki stands there awkwardly, curled in on himself. He wants desperately to take his leave, but doubts he'd be allowed without a proper dismissal.

Thor looks him over. “Norns, you’re a scrawny thing. You may as well eat.” He waves his hand in a lazy come-hither motion, his eyes half-lidded with drink.

Loki’s not sure if Thor intends to snap at him some more or perhaps give him a solid thwack, but nonetheless, he complies, setting the book aside and approaching his master.

Thor pats his thigh once. “C’mere.”

Loki hesitates a beat, then climbs in his lap. Instantly he is struck by just how different Thor feels. Thor is firmer, more muscular, thrumming with youth and vigor, whereas Odin was soft and mellow with age. Loki sits stiffly and awkwardly, unable to relax after just being yelled at. Thor is an unknown quantity, unpredictable, and Loki does not yet know how to navigate his mercurial moods. Odin had been familiar. Safe. He’d never once laid a hand on Loki in anger, never even raised his voice. Odin had shown more kindness to Loki than any other person, Aesir or Jotunn, and for a brief, stupid moment, Loki… misses him.

“Well? Go on. Take what you like,” Thor says behind him.

Loki remembers a time when he would have been insulted to be offered leftovers, as though he were a dog at its master’s table, but Loki knows he’s now dependant on Thor’s charity. His stomach rumbles almost painfully, and he’s reminded of just how long it’s been since he had a satisfying meal.

Loki rips a chunk of meat off Thor’s mostly-eaten roast goose and stuffs it in his mouth, chewing greedily and swallowing it half whole. He samples the lemon-salmon next, and the buttered garlic bread. It’s soft and chewy and delicious. Of course it is - nothing but the best for a king’s table.

“You were hungry,” Thor remarks, and points to a platter to Loki’s right. “Try these.”

Loki does, popping a bite-sized sausage roll in his mouth and nearly groaning at the sharp bite of spice enveloped in a flaky crust. The potato wedges and stewed lamb are just as marvelous. Loki tries everything within reach, until his stomach is nearly full and sated. He’s so relieved to be finally getting real food that he doesn’t even register Thor’s hand hot on his thigh, at first resting, then stroking.

Loki freezes, his heart thumping in his chest, then immediately chides himself for it. He knew this would happen. Thor could order him on all fours, on his knees, on his back, at anytime; Loki is in

no position to refuse. The matter is totally out of his hands.

Thor doesn't do anything more while Loki finishes and their dinner is cleared. The servants don't spare them a second glance, not that it would matter if they did. Loki is used to being pawed at.

Thor is quiet behind him. His fingers trail up over the skin of Loki's nape and sweep Loki's hair away and over his shoulder, trailing goosebumps in their wake. His face is right there - right *there* - and Loki can feel his breath hot on his skin, the prickle of his beard. Loki shivers, but otherwise sits still and acquiescent.

"Here," Thor says lowly. He reaches past Loki to the bowl of strawberries the servants had just brought out. He selects one and dips it in a bowl of warm, molten chocolate, then brings it up to Loki's lips. Loki takes the strawberry in his mouth, taking care not to nip Thor's fingers. The berry is small and succulent, and exquisitely paired with the dark chocolate. A small dollop of chocolate drips down his bottom lip, and Loki unconsciously licks at it. Thor's eyes dart down, tracking the motion of Loki's tongue.

Thor's attention is strangely...exhilarating. This is the King of Asgard, God of Thunder - the most powerful man in all the Realms. He could have anyone: any buxom high-born lady or limber boy, and yet here he is, with a Jotunn runt in his lap, utterly transfixed.

And maybe Loki has always thrilled in danger - even as a reckless youngling, taking flight when his brother was not looking - because for the first time since Odin fell into sleep, Loki thinks he could do this. If he played this right, he could have Thor by the base of his cock. He could earn Thor's trust and complete the task that was set before him. He could go home, his debt repaid, and live out the rest of his days in peace.

Thor adjusts them so they're pressed chest to back, with Thor's breath hot on Loki's shoulder. His arms envelop Loki's waist and he slides his hands up over Loki's taut belly, smoothing over the silk of Loki's shift. His touches grow bolder, cupping Loki's chest and thumbing over his nipples. Thor's breath is hot on the junction of his neck. Everything feels so feverish and hazy. Loki almost forgets what he's doing - who he's with. Thor bucks, jostling Loki on his lap, so that Loki is brushed against Thor's erection, the bulge unmistakable even under all of the heavy layers of Thor's robes. His hands travel lower, and lower -

"Ah," Loki gasps. His hands fly down to try and still Thor's.

Loki quickly realizes that this encounter is beginning to spiral out of his control. He can't just give it up like any red light prostitute! If he's to succeed, Loki has to show he's different, that he's not

going to spread his legs at the snap of Thor's fingers. When Loki finally lays with him, it won't be while he's bent over a table as dinner is still cooling. No, Loki will be taken in the Imperial Bedchamber, on sheets of the finest silk, on brocade and mahogany and enamel and gold. The way his royal blood deserves. The thought fills him with a deluded satisfaction. Yes, Loki will allow Thor to fuck him, in whatever manner he pleases, however rough and dirty...but he'll have to do it with Loki lying in the place of a Queen.

Thor moves to reach up under Loki's shift and Loki jolts into action.

"Stop," Loki whispers, tugging the hem back down. "Stop, stop."

Thor pulls back, blinking and dazed.

"What?"

Thor is apparently not accustomed to being refused, because he merely growls and resumes his ministrations, more forcefully than before.

"No!" Loki squirms. "No, stop."

At this, Thor does stop, his face twisting into a terrifying snarl.

"You dare," Thor hisses. He takes a fistful of Loki's hair and yanks his head backward, making Loki let out a pained yelp. "You little tease, you've no right to refuse me! I should have you whipped!"

Loki bristles inwardly at this. He didn't ask to sit in Thor's lap. He wasn't trying to tease him.

"I am not refusing you, my lord; I am only asking you to wait."

"Wait," Thor repeats, as if the idea were so preposterous it bordered on the inconceivable.

"Yes," Loki says, swallowing his nerve. He realizes this is his chance to buy some time. "Until the

night of your coronation."

Thor laughs, darkly amused by Loki's audacity.

"And why should I?" Thor jerks Loki's head. Loki swallows down his whimper. "When you *provoke* me like you do? What do I care, whether or not you're willing?"

"Because," Loki says. "You'll like me when I'm willing."

Thor seems to pause at this, but he doesn't release his iron grip on Loki's hair.

"I think I'd like you just as well when your pretty face is stained with tears."

That's exactly what Loki was afraid of. If Thor really wanted to make him cry, Loki has no doubt he'd succeed.

"Then consider this," Loki counters, "That on the night of your greatest triumph, after all of Asgard hails the coming of your golden reign, drinks to your health and prosperity, celebrates and feasts till dawn, you will go to your bed, as the one true King of Asgard, and take me as I know you've always wanted."

Emboldened, Loki grinds his hips in a small circle against Thor's cock, making Thor groan.

"Would that not be most satisfying, my lord?"

Thor tightens his grip on Loki's hip, "You won't spread your legs for anyone but a king, is that it?"

His voice is mocking, but Loki can tell he's seriously considering his proposal. The hint of hesitation strengthens Loki's resolve.

"I want you," Loki goes on, gaining confidence, "To watch me dance to your glory. I want you to put me on display, in silk and gold, so that every single guest there would slit his mother's throat for the chance to touch me. I want to make them envy you, because they'll know that I belong to

you, and that it'll be your bed I'll warm at night's end. And then I want you to lay me down, on your first night in the Imperial bedchamber, and fuck me as you please, until I beg you to stop."

"Loki…" Thor groans in warning. But underneath the lofty countenance Loki can see that he's wrecked, painfully aroused, thunderous and tense, and quite possibly rendered speechless. His nostrils flare and his jaw clenches. Loki can tell he's won.

Thor gives his hair one more vicious tug, then unceremoniously throws him to the ground. Thor sits back in his armchair and falls silent. Not knowing what else to do, Loki kneels on the floor at Thor's feet and waits. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Thor's fingers strum restlessly against the armrest.

"Fetch me a drink."

Shakily, Loki picks himself off the floor and does as he is bid. He feels Thor's eyes on the back of his neck as he goes, searing his skin like a brand. As soon as he's out of the room, Loki lets out the largest exhale of his life.

"Fuck," he whispers to himself, shaken yet also oddly exhilarated. He can't believe that worked. Thor had *listened*. Loki had brought him to the brink of losing control and got him to stop. Crown Prince Thor, who is used to getting everything he ever wanted. He's not impervious to Loki's charms. He can be tamed.

Loki heads to Odin's liquor cabinet and proceeds to fix Thor's drink, taking care not to spill a drip despite the tremor in his hands. Loki takes a few moments to compose himself, then returns to the dining room with a silver serving tray and Thor's cognac. Thor is staring at the fire, tense as a bowstring. He barely acknowledges Loki as he takes the glass from the tray. He's probably still horribly, painfully aroused. Serves him right, Loki thinks.

"I'll not be gentle with you," Thor warns matter-of-factly.

Loki nods. There's no way one could bed the God of Thunder and escape entirely unscathed. All Loki can do is try and ride out the storm as best he can.

Thor dismisses him with a wave of his hand. "You better be worth the wait."

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

thor gets his revenge in the best way

Chapter Notes

Extra special love to forkinthebutt and maryandmathew for the awesome fanart!!!
YOU MADE ME SQUEE ALOUD OMG

Thor takes to calling on him in the evenings, after Loki had already spent the whole day in rehearsals. By then, he's usually bone-tired and ravenous. Thor always makes Loki wait until he's done eating before he allows him to pick through his leftovers. Otherwise, Thor has not touched him, but that in and of itself is little solace. Just because Thor had given him his word that he'd wait, doesn't mean he'd make good on it.

For the most part, Thor is civil enough, ordering Loki around to fetch him this or that, refill his glass, stoke the fire, light his pipe. On evenings like this, Odin would usually give Loki mending to do, or let him read, or leave him to stretch by the mirror. Thor grants no such liberties, so Loki spends most of his time kneeling on the ground by Thor's feet, staring blankly at the fire and waiting to cater to Thor's passing whims. To pass the time, Loki visualizes his dance in his head, over and over.

"Where are you sleeping?" Thor asks out of nowhere.

"With the other dancers, in the dormitory."

"Quite the downgrade from the Imperial Bedchamber," Thor says, more to himself than anything.

Loki looks away with a shrug.

"I'm reopening the harem. There is a designated room for you there," Thor tells him. "You will move in effective immediately."

“Oh,” says Loki, dumbly. “Thank you, my lord.”

“It’s a great honour, I hope you know,” Thor drawls. “Noble families vie to get their girls admitted.”

Loki has no doubt that that’s true. “Yes. Thank you.” he says again.

“And boys, too, sometimes. But it’s a rare thing indeed to acquire a runt like you.” Thor ruffles Loki's hair and smiles darkly.

That night, Loki is escorted to the old harem quarters, which had been in disuse since Odin’s marriage to Queen Frigga several millennia ago. Odin loved her so much he chose to remain faithful to her. Loki would not have believed this if he hadn’t spent so much time alone with Odin. The Allfather spoke so reverently of her that Loki found himself rather jealous that such a love could be shared between two people. From what Loki’s heard, Odin used to be rather like Thor when he was young - brash and arrogant, eager for war and glory - until Frigga softened him in the ways of kingship. It’s greatly thanks to her calming influence that Odin became so widely adored and respected by the peoples of the Realms.

The old harem quarters are nice enough, Loki grants, with individual cells surrounding a large open common chamber, bathhouse and private garden. There is room to house about twelve concubines, perhaps more if they doubled up the bedrooms. Every entranceway is gated with golden lattice grills and guard posts intended to keep intruders out at night, and harem inmates in. Although the doors are not locked, as they had been in ages past, Loki can’t help but feel penned, like an exotic bird in a menagerie.

Loki supposes his placement here makes the most sense. He’s more intimate with Thor than an ordinary slave, but not so close that he could claim a chamber in the Imperial Suite as an official consort would. Loki wonders who else will be joining him here. Although Thor has kept favourites in the past, his passion tends to be both intense and short-lived. Which means that Loki will have to make the most of Thor's interest while he can.

Well. Loki views his harem cell as only temporary accommodation. After Thor’s coronation, Loki will sleep at Thor’s side, for it is on royal pillows that all the best secrets are told. Loki will not let himself be sent away after Thor is finished with him. No. Loki is not *disposable*, like some low born concubine. For Loki to succeed, he cannot let Thor come to see him as merely another hole to fuck.

Loki takes comfort, ironically enough, is in the humiliating treatment Thor inflicts upon him. Thor must find him intriguing, at the very least, else he would not bother tormenting him at all. Loki even thinks he can detect a sliver of affection in Thor's mockery. That, or else Loki's simply exhausted and delusional and his imagination is playing tricks on him.

One evening, Thor calls on Loki to serve him and his four closest friends - the fat one, the lady one, the pretty one and the short one - in his private dining room. Loki goes in with his guard uncharacteristically lowered, safe in the knowledge that he'll not be accosted while Thor's friends are present. With the distraction provided by their company, Thor won't have to resort to toying with Loki for amusement.

As far as Loki's duties go, it's dull work but not unpleasant. Loki fills drinks, serves platters, fetches this or that. Loki manages to tune out their inane conversation, and for the most part, he is ignored, although he can often feel Thor's eyes on him, lingering on his bare arms, his thighs. Loki hazards a glance up at the soon-to-be king, and as soon as their eyes meet, Thor's face melts into a warm, almost earnest smile. It would be sweet if it weren't….disconcerting. Loki turns away, his cheeks hot.

Loki soon excuses himself to go fetch another pitcher of ice water. The conversation at his master's table goes on uninterrupted; his absence is hardly noticed. As soon as he is out of eyesight, Loki's neutral, servile expression degenerates into a hearty scowl.

Insufferable, spoiled aristocrats, the lot of them! Filling their days with leisure and sport and banquets. They know nothing of suffering, of sacrifice, of what it means to be a part of something bigger than oneself. Where Loki is from, honour is earned rather than granted, and very easily lost. The Jotunn race are as cold and heartless as the ice fields of Jotunheim itself. It is nothing to cast a family member out for even a small misstep. Family honour must be preserved above all other things; if one hapless member has the misfortune of falling into disrepute…like a blight, he must be rooted out. This is the way of the Frost Giants. Loki knows it all too well.

Loki glowers as he refills the silver pitcher and even imagines spitting in it out of spite. He refrains, but the thought alone makes his lips curl into a demented smile. He could make such mischief if he dared to use his magic! He would never - it would be too great a risk for no worthwhile gains. If the Asgardians knew he was a Jotunn witch, he'd be bound, his power taken from him until Thor decides when and where to make use of him. Loki needs to be able to call on his magic if he were truly in desperate straits. It's the last lifeline he has left.

Loki is making his way back to the dining hall, pitcher in hand, when out of nowhere, he is grabbed from behind.

His first impulse is to struggle. He'd scream, too, if there wasn't a hand pressed over his mouth.

His silver pitched clatters to the ground, spilling water all over the marble floor. There isn't much time to react before he's half-dragged, half-carried into a small side room, used to store extra tables and chairs. Loki thrashes all the way, fearing that some guard had finally lost his inhibition. Whoever it is, he's much stronger than Loki.

"What are you doing?!!" Loki cries, irate, once he sees who it is. The brute almost given him a heart attack!

"Shhhh, Shut up, Loki. Shut up. I'm not here to fuck you," Thor says, herding Loki up against the wall. His lips purse slightly in amusement. "Not yet, anyway."

Loki makes himself flat, and doesn't for a second believe him. Fuck. His heart won't stop racing.

It must show on his face, because then Thor says, "So suspicious!" He boops Loki's nose with the tip of his finger, then laughs at Loki's bewilderment. "It's almost as if you don't trust me."

Thor grins, and Loki can already tell he's playing some kind of game with him, a game Loki doesn't yet know the rules to. Loki is trapped, and has no choice but to suffer through whatever he intends to inflict and hope for the best.

"I only wanted to speak to you in private."

"...Alright." Loki eyes him cautiously. "And for this you had to grab me from behind?"

"I was wondering if you were as ferocious as you looked! I was not disappointed."

Loki makes a half-hearted, breathy noise. "Not ferocious enough, it seems. Highness."

Thor laughs again, easily, and it makes Loki's stomach churn. Then Thor turns solemn. "I know how hard you've been working on my coronation dance. I hear from the Dance Mistress that you've been getting along well with the musicians and other dancers, and collaborating with them on the entirety of the performance. In fact, she said she was very impressed with your comportment. This pleases me," he declares.

Loki shifts uncomfortably. “My only wish is to serve you, my lord.”

“Oh, Loki. Flattery will get you everywhere. But I must be serious. I was thinking, your efforts deserve to be rewarded.” He reaches under his cloak. “So I got you a little present.”

Loki’s brows knot in confusion. Thor had been sulking at him all week! And now the sudden change of heart? Loki doesn’t like it. He must be up to something, surely.

Thor pulls a small velvet drawstring bag out of a secret pocket and hands it to Loki.

“Open it.”

Loki frowns and undoes the drawstring. Out roll two walnut-sized golden beads, connected to each other with a string. They are rather heavy, but not overly so, and as Loki rolls them in his hand, he can feel them rattle. They’re hollow on the inside, Loki deduces, containing a smaller loose bead inside. Loki has absolutely no idea what they are or what they’re for.

He looks up. Thor is still grinning down at him, evidently pleased with himself.

“Um, thank you.” Loki says, mystified. “They’re….beautiful.”

“Yeah. Now put them up your cunt.”

Loki blinks, the words not registering at first.

"What?"

“Put them,” Thor enunciates slowly, “Up your cunt. You have one, don’t you?”

Loki makes a strange coughing noise. “I - um -”

“It’s what they’re for. Pleasure beads. You’ll like it.” Thor waves his hand expectantly. “Go on, then.”

Loki should have known something was up. It never bodes well when Thor smiles at him like that.

Weakly, he says, “Now?”

“No, at Ragnarok. Yes, now. Quickly. I want to get back to my supper.”

“My lord, I don’t think -”

“Either you do it, or I will do it for you,” Thor threatens, and Loki’s got no doubt he would, but still he hesitates. Thor’s wolfish grin returns tenfold. “Or have you suddenly gone shy? Loki, my sweet, you are blushing….”

“No, I can do it,” Loki mumbles.

Shakily, he reaches up underneath his shift to shimmy out of his underthings, very mindful of Thor’s gaze on him. His cheeks burn. Reaching underneath the hem of his shift, Loki brings the first ball up to his entrance. His hands are trembling so hard he thinks he’ll drop them. He presses the first ball inwards, but his cunt refuses to give - Loki’s either not slick enough or too tight, or perhaps both. His skin snags, and Loki winces in discomfort.

“I, uh,” he says sheepishly, his mouth dry, “I don’t think I can -”

Thor’s eyebrows raise at this.

“What, is your little cunny not wet enough?” Thor presses Loki up against the wall, pinning him under his considerable bulk. “Let me help you, pet.”

“No,” Loki pleads, helplessly trying to push Thor away and failing miserably. “No, I can -”

“Easy, sweetheart,” Thor says. He brings his hand to his mouth and spits on his fingers. “Calm

down. I’m just going to ease the way a bit.”

He slips his wet fingers up underneath Loki’s shift and immediately hits his mark.

Loki makes an undignified squeak the feel of Thor’s blunt fingers rubbing on him. He scrambles at Thor’s arms.

“I told you - ah! I told you no!” Loki hisses, trying at once to pull away from, and towards, the pressure that’s sending bolts of electricity up his spine. “Not until -”

“I said I’m not going to fuck you!” Thor exclaims. “This is just for you, Loki. Be still! You will like this.”

Thor’s fingers quest lower, stroking Loki’s lips and around his opening.

“Ah!” Loki squeezes his eyes closed as Thor’s fingers sink inside him.

“Fuck, you’re tight,” Thor growls, thrusting his fingers in and out. “Like a little virgin. I’m beginning to think you were telling the truth about you and my father.”

Thor leans in close to Loki’s ear, his breath hot and his voice filled with dark promise.

“I am going to fuck you open. I’m going to fuck you so hard you’ll feel me up your throat. I’m going to to carve out a place for myself inside you.” he punctuates his words with sharp, merciless jabs of his fingers, “and I will wring climax after climax from your weary little body, until you scream yourself mute, and all of Asgard will hear you and know the truth of what you are."

Loki sobs helplessly as Thor’s fingers rub at him, inside and out, his clothes bunched up around him. Thor is everywhere. He’s all Loki can see and feel and smell. He’s searing and electric and dangerous; his words terrify but also heighten the horrible pleasure coursing in his body.

At length, Thor pulls away, and Loki could almost cry about that, too.

Thor brings his fingers up in front of Loki's face and rubs his thumb and forefinger together, slippery with Loki's juices.

"That's more like it," he oozes, and steps back coolly. "Try now."

Loki nearly collapses, his knees buckling precariously as soon as Thor's not there to support them anymore. He'd been clutching the beads so hard his knuckles turned white; he'd all but forgotten about them. He throbs between his legs but he dares not touch himself.

Trembling, Loki obeys, once again bringing the beads down under the hem of his shift to his cunt and pressing the first against the opening. Indeed, he's much, much slicker this time, and is face burns because of it. Applying a little force, Loki manages to slide the first in easy enough, and the second one too. His cunt clamps down on the foreign objects, holding them in, and Loki emits a pathetic choked out whimper.

"There now. How does it feel?"

"Uhh," Loki gurgles, "Like…..pressure."

Thor grins broadly and gives Loki's ass a solid thwack. "Not so silver-tongued now, are you?"

And that's when Loki realizes why the beads are hollow like that: when Loki moves, *they vibrate.*

"Hnng," Loki gasps at the sensation. Thor laughs.

"As I said, you'll like them," he says, waggling his eyebrows. "Now come on, pull your panties up. My dinner is getting cold."

Shakily, Loki bends down to obey.

"Our little secret." Thor winks. He grabs Loki's wrist and tugs him along; Loki can only trot helplessly behind him, the inner beads thrumming with his every step. They provide constant stimulation but it's not enough to grant him release; only enough to exacerbate Loki's arousal, make him writhe and and flush and ache to be touched. It's wonderful and torturous at the same

time. Humiliating, too, for Thor will surely be watching him closely now, delighting in Loki's discomfort as he orders him around. Loki does not see the rest of the evening playing out well.

He is having the worst time.

***

Thor is having *the best time.*

So that little runtling thought he could best the mighty King of Asgard? Leave him hanging and unsatisfied? Ha!

Loki is clever, Thor grants. Far too clever for his own good. Behind those green eyes lurks a potent, sharp intelligence that is better suited to a politician than to some smooth, long-legged pleasure slave. Thor is a shrewd man, and he does not like being toyed with. He will show the brat who the master is around here.

Thor takes his seat at the head of his table and tries to act normally. His friends do not rise to greet him when he returns. They are the only ones who are afforded this exemption, and only ever when Thor dines in private. Thor is something of a stickler for protocol. Courtly decorum is not mere ceremony; it is an outwards demonstration of the stratum to which one belongs. Allowing just a single breach of etiquette can undermine the whole social order. While Odin was king, Thor had always made sure to show him due respect. Now it is *his* turn at the top, and Thor will not stand for any slights against his person. Order must be maintained. To each his or her proper place.

Loki's proper place, as it happens, is at Thor's side, squirming ever so slightly. Just looking at him makes Thor want to laugh aloud with glee. It's clearly a struggle for him to act normally with the beads tucked inside him. Loki's fingers clench and unclench, his jaw tightens subtly, and his cheeks flush the loveliest shade of pink. He clearly wants to take the beads out - or at least touch himself. Thor will let him do neither. Not yet, at least.

Thor delights in ordering Loki to fill his cup or grind pepper on his meat, because every time Loki is forced to walk, his hips roll in a strange, stiff way, as if he's trying to mitigate the sensation of the rattling beads. He's unhappy, that much is certain; why, he's practically *seething!* What a precious little dumpling. Thor envisions having a great deal of fun with him in the future.

In high spirits, Thor turns back to the conversation at hand, laughing easily at Fandral's stories and

Volstagg's bad jokes. He's buzzing from the wine and stuffed to the brim with good food. Short of fucking Loki, Thor can't think of any way this night could get better -

And then it does. The conversation soon turns to Thor's coronation, about the ceremony, the feast, and of course the much-anticipated fireworks display. The day could not come soon enough in Thor's opinion. He's waited long enough to be crowned King, but he'd rather give his planners a few extra weeks to prepare than to suffer through a lacklustre, rushed celebration. Thor wants alcohol and meat and flowers and red banners. Thor wants acrobats and musicians, magicians and dancing slaves. Thor wants a thousand live doves to be released as he is crowned. Thor wants Asgard's fountains to flow with wine, and for all her people to feast to his greatness. Thor wants that day to be remembered for centuries to come. And some things, even for a King of Asgard, cannot be accomplished overnight.

"Loki here will be a featured dancer," Thor adds, almost proudly, in between bites of his cream dessert. "He's been working on it for almost three weeks straight. I'm sure he is very inspired by the occasion."

"A fine idea! There is no-one better suited to the task!" Volstagg turns to Loki. "Care to give us a preview?"

Loki startles at suddenly being addressed, and only answers when the five of them all look at him expectantly. He's probably distracted, Thor thinks gleefully.

"Oh," Loki says softly with a bow of his head. "Um, I shouldn't. It's not complete yet. My lord."

"Come now, Loki. It's not often we hear such high praise from your master! Not just a snippet?" Volstagg teases.

Then Thor is struck by a wonderful idea. The *best* idea.

"Yes, Loki." Thor agrees. "Give us a preview."

Loki's snaps his head towards Thor. "I…..It's supposed to be a surprise."

"Dance something else then. Let us appreciate your talents."

Loki balks, clearly uncomfortable. Poor thing, he can barely walk without trembling, let alone dance!

Through clenched teeth, Loki says, “I have not prepared a dance for you this evening, Your Highness.”

“Nonsense. Just do an old routine, we won’t know any different. These are my guests, and they want to be entertained. Isn’t that so?”

Sif and the warriors three exchange fleeting glances, clearly aware that something is out of sorts, but say nothing of it. They murmur their agreement. Masking his delight, Thor assumes his best authoritative voice.

“I will not be insulted in front of my friends."

At this, Loki’s shoulders slump in defeat. He bows his head. “As it pleases you."

“Excellent!” Thor claps his hands, his dark glare dissipating instantaneously. “Fetch the musicians.”

Loki excuses himself to go change, but before he has a chance to leave, Thor waves him close and then pulls him in by the upper arm.

“If you take them out I will know,” he warns.

Loki swallows, nodding once, and Thor releases him sharply. Loki pads off and Thor is already beside himself with anticipation.

In the meantime, the five of them settle in the sitting room for their usual post-supper hit of tobacco and liquor.

“I’m sure this isn’t necessary,” Fandral says. "He didn't look terribly keen."

Thor inhales as his pipe is lit by a serving girl. “What good is a dancing slave that doesn’t dance? Might as well make use of him. Besides,” Thor puffs on his pipe, “I have a feeling that tonight Loki will grace us with a particularly fascinating performance.”

“That little thing could earn his keep tenfold simply by lying on his back!” Volstagg exclaims. He nudges Thor with a raunchy smile. “The flexibility alone..”

Sif scoffs. “Unlike you, Volstagg, you can’t even *see* your toes, let alone touch them.”

“Well, I can wipe my arse well enough, that’s all that matters!” Volstagg says indignantly. He turns to Thor, “So tell us. How is he?”

Thor exhales a cloud of smoke. “I haven’t yet had him.”

They are, rather unsurprisingly, stunned.

“You*,* Thor?” Volstagg adds, “Thor, the Hammer of Asgard?”

Thor laughs at the utter shock on his face. “You say that like you cannot believe I am capable of any self-control at all! It’s called *delayed gratification.* You should try it sometime.”

“Oh, *you’re* plenty capable. Your manhood, on the other hand….”

“I’ll bed him the night of my coronation,” Thor says. “The sweetest end to the night's festivities. But fear not, you’ll be the first to get the full report.”

The conversation lulls on as the musicians set up against the wall. Loki follows soon after, his hair pulled back away from his face but still hanging loose down his back. His every step jingles brightly with the anklets wrapped around his feet: a lovely contrast to the sharp glower on his face.

“Ready?” Thor calls impatiently.

“Soon, my lord,” Loki replies, then turns to the musicians and speaks a few hushed words. A few moments later, he takes his position in the centre of the floor.

Thor cannot hide his mirth as Loki assumes his first pose. There’s a hard determined glint in his eye, the same one Loki gets whenever he steels himself to meet Thor’s challenge. It will be interesting to see how he handles *this.*

The vielle player begins first, the melody slithering up and down, followed then by the drummist and the cellist. To his credit, Loki puts a brave face on things, and begins his dance as though it were any other performance. The music is slow, and Loki moves at a more leisurely pace. He is undeniably lovely to watch, and Thor almost forgets to take delight in his little prank. Loki twirls, his shift billowing around him, kicks high in the air and flips backwards. Still, Thor thinks he detects a hint of sloppiness that isn’t usually present in Loki’s dancing, as though his attention were perhaps…...divided. He stumbles slightly out of a turn, and once or twice his anklets jingle off the beat, but Thor is hardly displeased.

Loki is hot. Wet.

Ready.

Thor could slide into his tight little hole right now, if he so chose. He could throw Loki to the ground, his friends be damned, and fuck the little slut like he deserves. He could bend him over the table, or hold him aloft against the wall.

Thor could do these things, and he will - when the time is right. But that isn’t the point of this exercise. So for now, Thor too must endure the torment of being left unsatisfied.

Loki whirls frantically with the rising pulses of music, faster and faster, and finishes a dramatic drop to the ground. He lies still, panting raggedly, his fingers clenched into tight fists. For a second, Thor thinks he might’ve made himself come.

No. There is no relief on Loki’s face. In fact, Loki rather looks like he’s nursing a cramp in his stomach. Perhaps that’s what he’d prefer his audience to believe. His thighs clamp tightly together, and he rolls his hips slightly, almost unnoticeably.

Thor claps, barely able to contain a triumphant grin, as Loki lies unmoving on the floor.

“Bravo! Oh ho ho, Well done, Loki my sweet! Truly a masterful performance.”

“....Um, is he alright?” Sif asks.

“He’s fine.” Thor gets up and stalks towards Loki’s prone form. Loki doesn’t budge, as if he thinks he could render himself invisible by just lying still enough. “Up you come, Loki, don’t be so dramatic,” Thor chides, scooping his runtling up by the bicep and hauling him to his feet, wobbly as a newborn colt. Loki whimpers as he is handled and hangs his head, shying away from his audience’s stares. Up close, Thor can definitely see that his whole body is thrumming, poor thing. Thor thinks he’s been tormented enough for one evening.

“My friends,” Thor says warmly, “The hour is late, and I am tired. I thank you for your company, but I think it’s high time Loki put me to bed. I will send for you tomorrow morning, and we will go riding. It has been too long since I have been borne by my beloved Gullfaxi.”

“Goodnight, goodnight. Sleep well,” Thor says, clapping each on the shoulder in turn. They wish him goodnight in return, then take their leave.

As soon they are alone, Thor’s face splits into a wild, maniacal grin. He curls over, laughing so hard he has to clutch his stomach.

“Oh, Loki!” Thor says. “Your face! So sour, pet! It’s like you were trying to set me aflame with those looks you were shooting me!” He pinches Loki’s cheek. “You’re lucky I find that petulant scowl of yours so precious. On any other slave, I’d have it flogged off.”

“I am glad to have amused you so,” Loki says dryly.

“You did,” Thor agrees cheerfully, picking up his cognac glass and downing the rest of it. “Very much so. Although I must admit, it wasn’t the best performance I’ve seen from you. Your service, too, was lacking. You’ve been, shall we say, somewhat *distracted* all evening.” He glances at Loki, darkly amused. “I assume you are still wearing them.”

“Yes,” Loki answers.

“I trust I don’t have to check?”

Loki shakes his head no.

“Very good.” Thor says, pleased. He tucks a loose strand of hair behind Loki’s ear and leans in close. “Not so much fun when you’re the one being teased, is it?”

Loki’s eyes flit away, looking everywhere but at Thor.

“Is it?” Thor grips him by the scruff.

“No,” Loki mutters. “It’s not. My lord.”

“That’s right.” Satisfied, Thor releases Loki, sets his cognac glass aside and flops down on the couch in front of his hearth. He lays on his back and sighs contentedly. What a delightful evening! Thor likes nothing more than a good meal, good company, and good entertainment.

“Elvish men have their womenfolk wear those beads while they are away,” Thor says lazily. “To make them eager for coupling and intensify their pleasure. Of course, I was not sure if they’d work on a runtling like you, given your…” He looks down, “...anatomy. But it is very encouraging to see you’re so responsive. Although I will fuck you regardless, if only to wipe that insufferable smirk off your face. Really, you should be grateful if I deign to grant you release,” Thor goes on loftily, looking down at his nails, “Or even see to your pleasure at all. I could keep you like this indefinitely. Have you constantly writhing, desperate and pleading..."

Thor pauses for effect, glancing briefly up at Loki. But Loki says nothing. It's as though he's waiting for Thor to dismiss him.

"Would you like to finish, pet?"

Loki's jaw looks so tight it looks like his teeth hurt. "I'd like to take them out."

"That's not what I asked," says Thor. "Or do you need a little extra stimulation? The Elvish have implements if you'd prefer to be stuffed double..."

Loki makes a face at this and shakes his head.

"Then come here."

Finally Loki obeys and shuffles towards the couch. Thor doesn't miss the wary look in his eyes. But rather than being displeased, he positively revels in it. Once he's in range, Thor pulls Loki down so that he's kneeling astride one of Thor's massive thighs. Loki swallows nervously, his chest rising and falling in rapid pants.

"There you are." Thor smiles, stroking Loki's leg.

"You swore you'd wait-"

"I said I wasn't going to fuck you!" Thor says, annoyed. "We had an agreement, did we not?"

Loki lets out a breathy exhale. "There are still two weeks to your coronation, my lord."

"Aye," Thor agrees. "And I think you will come to regret having made me wait."

Thor takes Loki's hips in hand and gets things going, pressing Loki down and forcing him to rock in small circles. Thor imagines the pleasure balls rolling inside his tight little cunt, bringing him closer and closer to climax; he's probably soaking his underthings through by now. Thor is in no mood for mercy, however. Loki is the one who chose to play this silly game. Let him see how he likes it. If he wants his release, then this is how he shall come to have it, by rutting against Thor's leg like a bitch.

Loki gasps, his mouth falling open.

"That's it," Thor encourages. "Poor thing, look at you, all wound up."

Loki falls forward, one hand pressing against Thor's chest for support. His eyes are closed and his breath comes in broken pants; his cheeks pink with arousal and probably more than a little embarrassment. He's so wanton like this; so honest in his pleasure.

Loki grinds harder now, needing less and less encouragement from Thor. Thor presses one hand to Loki's stomach, just to feel his taut belly flex and strain with his every movement. His skin is feverish underneath the flimsy material.

"Keep going," Thor murmurs, mesmerized. "Come on."

He grips Loki's hips harder, directing his movements, especially when Loki inadvertently rubs up against Thor's cock. Thor had been half-hard since he first pulled Loki aside, and that's even *after* he had excused himself to be serviced by that blonde page. He'd thought that would take the edge off his lust, but Thor wasn't counting on just how unbearably arousing Loki is when he's in the throes.

Thor reaches down and thumbs at the place between Loki's legs, and Loki closes his soft, delicate hand over Thor's. In truth, Thor still isn't quite sure what Loki's got under his underthings (Thor being rather unacquainted with the naked Jotunn form), but Loki seems to like the way Thor rubs at him, so Thor persists.

"Come on, Loki," Thor repeats. "Come on, sweet thing. I want to see it."

Loki makes a final gasp, then convulses erratically, rolling his hips almost helplessly against Thor's leg and fingers. He is truly beautiful when he comes, his lips and cheeks flushed pink and his eyelashes fanned against his cheeks.

Loki lets out a lovely airy gasp, and he tension seeps from him like a sprung trap. He clutches desperately at the fabric of Thor's shirt and Thor hushes him until he finally stills.

Once he's come down, Loki covers his face with his hand. *Embarrassed*, Thor thinks smugly - humbled by his most base animal urges, by the pleasure Thor has coaxed from his body. Loki clearly isn't sure what he should do now that's he's climaxed. There is no way he's unaware of Thor's erection digging into his leg. But for the moment, Thor is quite content to let him stew in his uncertainty.

"There now," Thor says almost fondly, rubbing his thigh. "Didn't I tell you you'd enjoy it?" He pries Loki's hand off his face, "Don't hide from me."

Loki's eyes are glazed; his orgasm definitely seems to have taken the edge off his scowl. He looks softer now. Raw. He looks down at Thor with an unreadable, glazed expression, his lips glistening

in the soft firelight. His mouth opens once, twice, and then he curls over, pressing his face to Thor's, seemingly to seek out his kiss.

"Whoa!" Thor pushes Loki back with a hand around his delicate throat. Automatically, he says, "You cannot kiss me."

Loki's brows knot in confusion. He blinks twice, and Thor might be mistaken but he thinks he catches a flash of hurt in Loki's eyes.

"You are not high enough in station," Thor says, though not ungently. A kiss on the mouth is something shared between those of similar rank, and Thor has never permitted his loveslaves and concubines the privilege. They must not delude themselves. They must remember who and what they are to Thor.

Still, Thor can't help but wonder what Loki's lips taste like, if they are as soft as they look. He's never really kissed anyone before.

"Oh," is all Loki says.

As a conciliatory gesture, Thor takes one of Loki's delicate hands in his and kisses the back of his wrist.

"Come," Thor says as he tugs Loki back down so that Loki is pressed flush to Thor's side. He hikes one of Loki's lean legs up over his thighs while simultaneously trying to ignore his own hard cock, which is throbbing insistently in his breeches. Not for the first time, Thor wonders why he allows himself to be tortured so.

"You must be eager to have them out." Thor snakes his hand behind Loki, hitching up the shift. Loki whimpers, his body going tense, but he stills to allow Thor access. With little finesse, Thor tugs Loki's underthings aside and slips his hand between the soft mounds of Loki's ass, lingering a moment to savour the taut, youthful firmness. He rubs the pad of his finger on the tight furl of Loki's arsehole, just to remind Loki that Thor owns this too, and that there is nothing Loki can deny him.

Loki freezes, his entire body going stiff; but Thor only chuckles. He increases the pressure, but not enough to breach Loki's body. Thor's cock twitches eagerly at the thought of fucking Loki here too, in the manner reserved for slaves.

"There are many ways to make love," Thor says. "Many ways to find pleasure, my sweet. I have much to teach you."

Finally, Thor sinks his hand further down, where Loki is warm and humid and wet. Thor groans from the feel of it alone. Thor slips his fingers inside and pulls the toy out gently, noting how Loki's expression tightens as each bead pops out.

Thor hums as he brings them up for inspection. Loki has creamed them; the beads are slick and shiny with his juices. He's almost tempted to have Loki lick them clean, to have him taste himself, but decides against it when he observes Loki's downcast eyes and blush-pink face. He's learned his lesson, Thor decides. That is enough for tonight.

"You did well. I am most pleased." Thor folds the beads in Loki's delicate hand. "A worthy gift for my most dutiful, most faithful, most beautiful slave. Now, what do you say?"

"Thank you, my lord," Loki mumbles.

"That's right." Thor's grin widens. He wants desperately to have Loki finish him off, but somehow, he feels like that would diminish his victory. So instead, Thor thwacks Loki's rump good-naturedly. "Rest. You must be weary. I will call on you again tomorrow."

Loki nods, extricating himself from Thor's grasp. He does a curtsy-like gesture and pads off, still wobbling on his legs. Thor rubs at where Loki's warmth still clings to the fabric of his robes. He hums, pulling out his hard cock and stroking himself leisurely. He could easily call on someone to finish him, but Thor has not even the patience to wait another moment longer. He comes shortly thereafter, smelling the scent of Loki's arousal on his fingers.

Chapter 5

"I would like to see you."

Loki looks at the floor, his face hot.

"I…mean you no harm." Odin's brow furrows, and he reaches out to tuck a stray lock of hair behind Loki's ear. "It has been so long since I have gazed upon such beauty. Forgive an old man his foolishness."

Loki could almost roll his eyes at this, if he weren't so nervous. He thought to be smooth, seductive, charming, elegant; instead he stands here, quivering like a lost child. Perhaps his trepidation is working in his favour, because Odin tilts his face up with a finger underneath Loki's chin.

"You needn't fear me, child."

Loki is well used to being lied to, but the open, heartfelt sincerity in the Allfather's face gives him pause. Loki could almost believe that he means it.

Shakily, Loki unties his belt, then lets loose the shoulder clasps from his shift. The fabric billows to the ground, leaving him nude before the King of Asgard's gaze. A chilly draft prickles his skin, but does little to soothe his nerves. He lets his mind wander elsewhere for the briefest moment - to the icy homeland he might never see again. This is why he's here, isn't it? He should be relieved he'd gotten this far. That they'd gotten him into Odin's private rooms is a victory in and of itself.

Loki is not sure what to say or do, so he just stands there dumbly, allowing Odin to stare his fill. It couldn't be more than a few moments but Loki feels as though time has congealed to molasses.

"My word," Odin says reverently. "So young."

It is the curse of this body that Loki does look young, although in fact he is not that much younger than Helblindi. This is Loki's edge; the ace in his sleeve. On the surface, he has all the innocent charm of a naive, fresh-faced youngling. Inside, he has the cunning of a nearly grown adult Jotunn. It's in his best interest to keep up this facade, Loki knows, so he widens his eyes and hunches his shoulders. Maybe this way Odin will be gentle with him, and will take care not to hurt

him.

When one is in the business of seducing the mighty King of Asgard, it isn't hard to make the frightened-rabbit-act convincing.

Odin offers his hand, and Loki takes it unthinkingly, although it seems like an odd gesture. There is a gentleness to the old man that Loki simply wasn't expecting. Is this truly the same God-King who smote his brethren and dashed their heads upon icy rock?

Delicately, Odin guides him to step into the bathtub, and Loki crouches down into the lukewarm water. At least it's not hot. Loki may have been bleached, but he has still retained his Jotun distaste for heat. The Allfather sits next to the tub's edge on a small stool.

"Is that too warm?" Odin asks.

"No, it's fine," Loki replies shakily. "Majesty."

Odin nods, and Loki arranges himself so that he's kneeling, the water only a few inches deep, but enough to cover past the juncture of his legs. He lathers a washcloth and slides it down his shoulders. The show goes on, as much a performance as when he'd first danced for Odin earlier that evening. This time, however, it's eerily quiet, and there's nothing to distract him from the heavy weight of Odin's stare.

Loki steals a quick, shy glance up at him for the briefest moment, just to gauge what the old man is thinking, what he might intend. But Odin's face is a blank mask of tranquil melancholy.

Odin smiles softly.

Loki smiles back, and ducks his head.

"You are very beautiful," Odin tells him at length.

This is nothing Loki hasn't heard all his life. What good is beauty when he is destined to live his life like this?

He looks down modestly. "I am pleased you find me so."

Odin chuckles, but it is weary, self-deprecating. "I regret that I cannot even look away from you. I must be making you uncomfortable."

Loki's mouth opens and closes, but the elderly king does not seem to expect Loki to respond.

He turns somber, "Are they....kind to you here?"

He says this like he's seriously considering taking up Grandl's offer. Loki masks his triumphant smirk as best as he is able.

"Forgive me, Great King," Loki says, his eye casts downwards. He shifts slightly in the water. "I would prefer not to say."

"I see," Odin says, a frown tugging his lips. There's pity in his face, and it is indeed warranted. Loki is a pitiful creature.

Loki sweeps his hair aside to offer Odin a glimpse of his long neck, and draws attention to it by smoothing the washcloth over it.

"May I?" Odin asks, gesturing to the nearby pitcher. Loki nods, and the Allfather holds it under the faucet until it's nearly full. Obediently, Loki tilts his head back to let him trickle water over his hair, wetting it completely. Loki wrings out the excess moisture, then massages his favourite scented oil into the ends. He combs out the knots with an ivory comb.Odin is ever silent at his side. His stare is unnerving, and Loki's hands shake.

"I could give you a good life," Odin says out of nowhere. "I would not mistreat you. You would want for nothing."

He speaks as though Loki had a choice in the matter. Loki could almost laugh. If given half a chance, he would go to Asgard, Helblindi had made that perfectly clear. How he'd be treated there is irrelevant.

“I would like that,” Loki says softly. “To go with you.” He lowers his voice to nearly a whisper, as if he’s about to tell a dark secret, “I do not much want to stay here.”

He lets Odin make of that what he will. It’s partly the truth, anyway. The King’s face softens, and he nods. He’s quiet thereafter.

For lack of anything else to do, Loki continues to lather himself and rinse the suds off with water, as if he hadn’t come up to Odin’s chamber already primed and prepped and scrubbed clean. Sometimes, it feels like Odin is looking through *him rather than* at *him. It’s hard to tell with that patch covering half his face. Loki is antsy; he wants to get things moving. That way, it’ll be over with quicker.*

He leans back somewhat, spreading his legs. Loki runs his hands over his chest, his nipples. This usually feels pleasurable, but Loki is so preoccupied that he’s sure he couldn’t bring himself off even if he were straddling the old rattly water pump back home, as he used to do, before Helblindi caught him and tattled to their sire. He brings his fingers lower, and lower. He lets his head fall back and sighs. He parts his flesh.

Odin snaps back to the present with a start.

“Loki, no,” Odin, says, horrified. “You must stop.”

Loki has no time to even think before he’s gathered to his feet and enveloped in a large, fluffy towel. Had he done something wrong?

The confusion must register on Loki’s face because then Odin growls angrily and says, “You would think this is why you’re here.”

Loki is lifted out of the tub and set on the ground. Odin rubs Loki’s back vigorously, but not ungently. It’s more a comforting gesture than anything, and Loki is, momentarily, thrown off-balance. Why else did Odin allow Loki to be sent to his rooms, if not for this?

“My virginity is yours,” Loki says, somewhat dumbfounded. “It would be a great honor to give it to you.”

Odin sighs, and he seems so tired. So old.

“Is that what they told you to tell me?”

“No, Great King, it is simply the truth. I would gladly lie down for you.”

“You’re too small,” Odin shakes his head.

“I am old enough,” Loki says, “I am not yet fertile, but if you wanted children -”

“Loki, enough!” Odin says. “Gods above! I am far too old to sire children, let alone to bed one as young as you. You yourself are little more than a child.”

Loki quickly looks away. “Forgive me, majesty. I did not mean to insist…..”

“No. No apologies, child. I am not angry. Not with you.” He cradles Loki’s cheek, his face wistful, “I would not have your purity corrupted. I could not sully you with these hands.”

“Will you send me away, then?” Loki asks, brows knotting, “I was sent here…..for you. To please you. And I fear my masters’ wrath should they find I have not done my duty….”

“Of course not, Loki,” Odin soothes. “Hush, now. Of course not. Let us retire together so that they think what they will. And tomorrow morning I will arrange to have you brought back with me to Asgard.”

Loki looks up, momentarily stunned. He hadn’t expected it to be this *easy. “T-truly?”*

“If that is what you would like.”

The tears of relief that spring to Loki’s eyes are not entirely of his own doing, but Loki plays them anyway.

“I have upset you….”

“No,” Loki shakes his head vehemently. “No, Great King, I am happy.” He offers a watery smile. “I am a wretched creature, undeserving of such kindness.”

Odin reaches for a clean dressing gown for Loki to wear. Loki sniffles and allows Odin - Odin, mighty God-King of Asgard, ha! - to clothe him again.

“Hush,” Odin says again, but his voice is warm, even fond. He strokes Loki’s cheek with a withered knuckle. “No more words. We are both tired. Be good and help an old man to bed.”

Odin shuffles to the bedchamber, Loki in tow, and seats himself on the edge. He pauses.

“I would like very much to hold you in the night, Loki, if you will let me. It has…...been a long time since I have felt the warmth of another as I slept……”

He says this self-consciously, even sheepishly, and Loki is careful to appear accepting and sweet - even if he does find the proposition ridiculous, bordering on pathetic.

Loki smiles and climbs in, nestling himself at Odin’s side. His still-wet hair dampens the sleeve of Odin’s nightrobe, but Odin doesn’t ask him to move. He rests his hand above the King’s, lacing their fingers together. Odin rumbles contentedly, clearly pleased with the gesture.

Perhaps this won’t be as impossible as he’d first thought.

***

Loki wakes in the night with a start and has to blink several times to remember where he is. The moonlight streaming through the lattice-window casts intricate weblike shadows on the floor, indicating that dawn is still hours away. He can hear muffled conversation through the harem walls: Amora, he thinks - Thor’s head concubine, newly arrived from the country - and that other girl whose name Loki can’t remember. Don’t they sleep? *They* don’t have to get up in the morning for rehearsals, run themselves ragged to fluff their master’s ego. Being a living testament to Thor’s virility, it seems, is more than enough to earn their keep.

Loki rolls over, holding a pillow down over his head both to silence the noise and to keep out the memories that threaten to spring to mind. They come, unbidden, despite his best efforts: Thor's hand on his stomach, the solid mass of him between Loki's legs, of his breath hot on Loki's neck -

Loki slaps a hand over his face, trying to physically shake the memory out of his mind's eye. He can't *believe* he'd let that brute humiliate him so! Subject him to such mocking torment, and refuse him a kiss afterwards. Loki curses his body for reacting the way it did.

The thing is, it wasn't even the cursed beads inside him, nor the feeling of Thor's fingers on him that made Loki topple over the edge. It wasn't Thor's hot palm against his stomach, nor the maddening softness of the silk against his nipples. If it were only these things, Loki might've been able to live with himself, explaining away his body's betrayal as a mere physiological reaction.

But no. The fact of the matter is, at certain angles, Thor has Odin's gentleness to his face. And Loki was stupid enough to take solace in it. Loki had never really thought of Thor as *Odin's son,* exactly. He knew intellectually that this was so, but he never saw a resemblance in any meaningful sense….until that moment. It was the way Thor looked at Loki: without malice, without cruelty. Lust, yes, but his voice had been soft and sincere, lacking its usual caustic sharpness. Thor had whispered sweet words of endearment that Loki, foolishly, had taken to heart. And Loki had let himself get lost in the fantasy that maybe Thor cared for him beyond the carnal pleasure offered by Loki's flesh. That maybe Thor thought he was special.

Loki is delusional. Thor has others; that's plain enough. He shouldn't be surprised Thor has chosen to fill his harem. And yet, Loki still found himself stung when he realized he'd be getting company.

And some companions they are, too. Loki would gladly let Thor get him with child if it meant living a life of carefree luxury for the rest of his days. As far as Loki could tell, all Thor's women do is lie around, pluck their body hair, gossip, and coo over their bastard children. Loki knows he'd go mad of boredom in a month, but still. It's the principle of the thing.

Well. *Loki* has no body hair to pluck. So there's that.

Loki is tired and grumpy come morning. A baby's cry wakes him - the latest of Thor's brood. Loki groans and wills the child to shut up. At this point, sleeping down at the dormitory would be preferable. He drags himself up off the floor, the exhaustion bone-deep even after a night's rest. The beds here are floor-level, with the mattresses sunk into the ground so that new mothers can sleep with their infants without worrying that their babies will roll off the edge. Half his floor is made of springy mattress, and there's a full complement of pillows and cushions along the perimeter. Loki is grateful, at least, that he wasn't issued a cellmate.

It would be nice to get out for awhile, to take a walk and clear his head before rehearsals are due to begin. Loki dresses and makes his way down to the main gate. There is one other exit, a passageway that leads up to the Imperial Suite. Only Thor has that key.

The guard on the other side of the main gate stubbornly refuses to let him out until morning breaks.

“You will have to wait until the sun rises. No exemptions will be made.”

“Fine,” Loki hisses, rattling the gate. He paces outside until the appointed time, and then all but tramples the harem guard on his way out. Loki stubbornly decides then and there that he’ll not ever let himself rot away behind those gilded bars.

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Rehearsals for the coronation are, to put it mildly, a frantic blur. The palace swarms with visitors and servants, all of whom bustle about in a mad, incoherent frenzy. The influx of people is overwhelming and the noise they generate exacerbates Loki’s headaches. Loki is confident enough in his solo, even if thinking about actually performing it at the coronation fills his stomach with dread. But he’d also been granted a place in the chorus for the opening number alongside hundreds of other court dancers. Their dance style is different from the one Loki was trained in, and although he is able to keep pace, he feels out of his element.

Loki has never been around so many females. He’s seen them in Vanaheim before coming to Asgard, but never in such quantities. It seems odd to Loki that the two Asgardian genders are purported to have such distinct characteristics. Women are slighter of frame, and tend to have pretty long hair. Like Loki, they dress in bright colours and wear jewelry.This is probably why the Asgardians place Loki with them. Seems a superficial reason, and rather silly. Lots of Jotun like these kinds of things, even ferocious warriors, and it is only considered an individual’s preference. Loki is Loki; he doesn’t expressly consider himself feminine, even if they call him that. Nor is it a label he objects to. He is just himself.

It’s not like Loki exactly fits in with the girls. They all whisper about him. They knew he was Odin’s, perhaps had even seen him dance before. They also know he holds Thor’s favour now. Loki haughtily tilts his nose in the air. Once he carves himself a place in Thor’s immediate household - in his bed - their gossip will count for nothing.

The dance mistress might as well crack a whip, for the amount she barks at them.

*"S*ickle feet, *sickle feet!!"* She hollers, somehow louder than the entire orchestra. Loki is frankly amazed at the vocal projection of such a tiny woman. Loki doesn't understand the terminology she uses, and it takes time before he is able to deduce what she means by this or that word or phrase. Jotun dancing is more intuitive than technical, and moreover, Angrboda had never been forthcoming with verbal instruction. Loki knows he's disadvantaged compared to the other dancers, but that only drives him to work that much harder.

They're rehearsing in the Imperial throne room in full costume today - one of the few rehearsals left before their performance. On the night of the coronation there will be thousands of people here watching. This all suddenly feels so *real.* Not just the coronation itself, but also what Loki will have to do with Thor afterward.

For all his talk, Loki has never actually slept with anyone before. And here he had to go and promise himself to the King of Asgard on the pivotal first night of his reign! Not the most relaxing of circumstances for anyone's first time. In reality, Loki is not sure how he will do. He doesn't know how to please a man, especially one with as much experience as Thor. What if Thor finds him dull or stiff? Or too tight? What if it hurts? Loki hopes that Thor likes him enough by now to be gentle with him.

Loki's stomach gets in knots if he lets himself dwell on it too much. He focuses instead on the matter at hand: getting through the coronation itself.

"Hey!" Loki shouts, as the girl in front of him freezes abruptly. Loki barely manages to come to a halt in time and nearly trips over her bowed back. He's about to snap at her to watch where she's going, but holds his tongue when he realizes that everyone is stopping.

There are whispers all around, *the king, the king,* and now they're all dropping to one knee. Loki follows suit, briefly scanning the cavernous throne room. Thor is off in the distance at the base of the stairs, speaking to the head planner and the Dance Mistress. Even from afar, he's utterly resplendent in his red cape and official armour.

All this madness for one person. Loki is suddenly struck by the very real feeling that he *is* just one in a thousand to Thor, that any of these dancers would lift their skirts for him in a heartbeat. The thought churns his stomach unpleasantly.

They are much too far away for Loki to hear what they're saying, but Thor's face seems cheerful enough, indicating that he's pleased with whatever he'd just seen. At the impatient tap-tap-tap of the Dance Mistress' baton on the marble floor, the chorus rises to attention. It's hard to tell, but Loki thinks Thor is staring right at him.

Did he just….wink?

Loki averts his eyes, blushing.

Damn him.

The Dance Mistress barks, “From the top of the main chorus. Places. *Places."*

There is a vicious glare in her eyes that dares anyone to miss the jette in the third refrain while the soon-to-be king is watching.

The musicians give them eight counts to prepare, and then it begins.

Loki performs automatically, his muscle memory serving him well. He ought to feel less nervous in a dance troupe of over a hundred, but he somehow he can still sense the heavy weight of Thor’s stare upon him. Or perhaps it’s just his imagination. They finish with a final pose and the music stops. It’s absolutely silent with anticipation as the head planners await Thor to pass judgement. Thor doesn’t clap. Instead, he turns to the Dance Mistress and makes some comment. She replies and bows, and Thor takes his leave. Everyone drops to a knee until he’s gone.

The Dance Mistress taps her baton on the ground.

“Again,” she barks, and the dancers rush to take their places. The lack of an onslaught of criticism means Thor had been pleased, Loki surmises. He takes his place in the formation and they begin from the top.

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Loki is exhausted by the time he trudges up the stairs to the harem. He craves silence after spending the day going over the same section again and again and again. Evidently, their performance for Thor the day before hadn’t quite met the dance-mistress’ standards, even if the king had been impressed. She was especially brutal today, but Loki respects her for it. In this way, she rather reminds him of Angrboda. Loki gets the sense that she plays no favourites based on idle gossip. She does not seem to care that Loki is a Jotun runtling, nor that he’s a resident of the palace

harem. Skill and merit are her only considerations. Loki appreciates that in a person, for it is a quality so rarely to be found.

Loki can hear his fellow harem inmates' titters echoing down the hall long before he gets to the gate. The guard lets him in and locks the door behind him. Loki mutters a curse under his breath. Curfew is set at eight o'clock, and Loki has hardly a minute left to spare. He had to jog to make it back in time so as not to be the recipient of another scolding from the Harem steward. Harem steward - Ha! More like the harem gaoler.

His only consolation is the aroma awaiting him in the common room. For all that he despises the harem, Loki can't complain of not being fed properly.

Then he finds what has made the women all a-twitter:

The soon-to-be-King is lounging on a couch in the courtyard garden surrounded by his resident concubines. His hair is swept back in a ponytail, and he dons a casual, yet still regal wine-red jacket. He looks frustratingly handsome, and he must know it. His concubines sit around him adoringly, each vying for a shred of his affection. One is playing a flute; another, a harp. Another cradles her newborn child by Thor, hoping for a chance to place it in his lap. Thor has recognized the children here, Loki knows, even though none of them are official heirs. Only a Queen can provide that. And Thor is yet unmarried…

"Ah Loki!" Thor beams and waves him forward. There is a child on his lap - a blonde boy, perhaps no more than four. Amora's elder child. The boy is fondling a small toy horse which Thor perhaps had just given him. Thor likes his children well enough, Loki thinks, but probably only because he sees them sparingly, and only when they're clean, fed, and happy.

Loki bows, all the way down to the ground then back up again.

"Highness."

Thor pops a chocolate into his mouth. Beside him, Amora narrows her eyes. "At rehearsals, I presume?"

"Yes, sire."

“The date draws near. You must be getting nervous.”

“A little,” Loki confesses, shifting on his feet. He’s tired, and wants nothing more than to stuff his belly and go to bed. He’s not in the mood for Thor’s games while all the other women mill about, scrutinizing his every move.

“I am beside myself with anticipation,” Thor oozes. “Everyone of importance will be in attendance from across the Nine Realms. There will even be an ambassador from Jotunheim present. The first Jotun dignitary in a century.”

Well, isn’t that interesting. Loki itches to ask who; there are only a few noble clans left in Jotunheim, and he’d known them all, back before he was sent away on this cockamamie mission.

“Oh,” Is all Loki says. His face betrays nothing.

“But you needn’t worry pet. I was most impressed with what I saw yesterday. Even in a cast of hundreds you shine like a jewel.”

Loki startles, taken off guard by the earnestness of Thor’s compliment. No hint of malice or sarcasm taints Thor’s voice. He means it, Loki realizes.

“Thank you,” Loki says softly. “Highness.”

“Mama says you’re a boy and a girl,” The boy pipes up from Thor’s lap, very very loudly.

A ghost of a smile tugs at Thor’s lips; Loki’s mouth drops open.

“Njall!” Amora chides gently from Thor’s side, “I do apologize.” She speaks more to Thor than to Loki, “He’s at that stage, all these questions, night and day! So precocious, our boy.”

The boy goes on, “You don’t look like a girl.”

“He’s both.” Thor explains, ignoring the child’s mother. “Both a girl *and* a boy, at once.” A

mischievous twinkle flashes in his eyes. Lowly, with his eyes locked on Loki's, he says, "That's what makes him so special to *daddy.*"

Thor winks at him again, cheeky bastard, and Loki's face instantly flushes with heat. He might've rolled his eyes if he weren't so suddenly mortified. It's that smug, idiotic smile on Thor's face! What Loki wouldn't give to blast it off with a bolt of magic.

The boy's expression is perplexed; he's clearly unsatisfied with this answer. "How can he be both?"

"I think it's time for the children to be put to bed." Thor announces with a chuckle, clearly having had his fill of his children for the time being. He unceremoniously lifts his boy off his lap and hands him to Amora, who, Loki is pleased to note, is failing miserably at hiding her scowl. Jovially, Thor waves them off. "The hour is late. To bed with you all. Not you." Thor barks at Loki. "You stay here."

Loki stays grounded in place as the other women file out. They wait in silence until it's just the two of them left in the garden. Thor's eyes trace up and down Loki's body, inspecting him like a specimen on display. Loki cannot speak until Thor addresses him first.

"And are you still angry with me?" Thor asks at length, reclining onto his couch. He scratches his belly leisurely, looking sated and lazy. "That same frown again, my dear; it suits you ill."

Loki forces out a watery smile. "No, my lord. It was all in good fun, as you say."

Thor laughs brightly. "I apologize for the boy. You know how children are."

"I did not know *that* was common knowledge."

"The fact of your anatomy? The rumor mill churns out all sorts of nonsense, but occasionally one hits upon a truth or two." Thor swirls his wine in his glass. "Many things are whispered about you."

Loki had always been aware of this. His presence at Odin's side couldn't have gone without raising a few eyebrows. He'd done his best to keep to himself, seal his ears and concentrate on the task at hand, but at times, the scrutiny had gotten the better of him.

“I heard that you cast a love-spell on my father.”

Loki’s head snaps up. “What?”

Thor waves his hand dismissively. “Ridiculous, I know. There is no such things as love-spells. But it certainly would explain a lot, wouldn’t it?”

Loki laughs nervously. “Ridiculous,” he echoes.

“I heard he found you bathing naked in a pond, like a water-nymph. That you said you’d tell his fortune in exchange for a kiss.”

At this, Loki does laugh, shaking his head. *That’s* one he hadn’t heard before.

“Does your court have nothing better to do, than lounge about and conjure such fanciful stories?”

“Evidently not. That’s not even the worst of them, I fear...”

“It may disappoint your Highness to learn that my first meeting with the All-father was nowhere near so romantic. I was given to him as tribute from a Vanir lord. No magic ponds or love-spells to speak of, I’m afraid. But, as it happens, I *can* tell fortunes,” Loki teases, noting Thor’s playful attitude and high spirits. He has Thor’s attention; he may as well make the most of it. “Would you like to hear yours?”

Thor is intrigued by this; he nods his assent and waves Loki forward. Loki sits down beside him, reaching for Thor’s hand. Loki uses one of his own hands to support Thor’s wrist, the other to trace the lines on his palm with a delicate fingertip.

“Let me see,” Loki says, inspecting Thor’s palm. He hazards a glance up to Thor, and is heartened at the amused, easy-going expression on his face. He makes an exaggerated thinking face, and furrows his brow in mock-concentration. His old nurse use to read fortunes like this - a childish trick - but Loki thinks he remembers enough to bluff his way through a reading.

“A long life line,” Loki begins. “Means a long life, devoid of sickness. Vitality too. Strength and courage.”

Thor laughs. “Loki, my sweet, I fear this may be nothing but an exercise in flattery.”

“Shhh,” Loki chides gently. “I am not yet finished.” Thor rumbles, a surprised sound. His eyebrows shoot up but he doesn’t tell Loki to stop, nor does he retract his hand.

“The head line is long,” Loki goes on, then hums thoughtfully.“A taste for adventure, enthusiasm for life. Rationality and intellect…”

“You’re making this up as you go!”

“My lord, this is an ancient Jotunn custom, and not one to be treated so flippantly.” He says this jokingly, but it isn't a lie that back on Jotunheim, much is read into the lines etched on one's body. Maybe not one’s future, but certainly one’s past. Loki casts his eyes back downward, inspecting Thor’s hand thoroughly. “Rationality, intelligence, mercy when the time calls for it. The makings of a true King.”

Thor shakes his head, chuckling. “You would say such things to me even if you were reading a bird’s innards!”

“I speak only the truth of what I see. Ah, but what is this?” Loki curls in closer. “Oh, this is interesting. *Very interesting* indeed.”

“What?” Thor immediately responds, and Loki thrills in his rapt enthusiasm.

“Your heart line, Highness,” Loki trails a fingertip over Thor’s palm. “Most unusual.”

“What about it?”

Loki smiles secretly. “The line is long, which indicates a large capacity for love…”

“Yes…”

Loki frowns, “But it’s curved, you see? The potential is there, but it has not been fulfilled…”

“Not been fulfilled?”

“Not yet.”

Thor chuckles, a sudden arrogant air about him. “My bouncing nursery begs to differ.”

“*True love,* ” Loki corrects. “You must meet your true love. Then the line will straighten.”

“Now *you* are the one telling stories.”

“And you are good to humor me.” Loki cradles Thor’s hand in both of his - a tactic that used to work wonders on Odin.

“So you’re saying, when I find my true love, the lines on my hand will unfurl.”

“That’s what they say.”

“Overnight?”

“Slowly, I suppose.”

“And what if I’ve already met her?” Thor challenges.

Loki smiles weakly, not missing the gender of the pronoun he’d used. He shrugs, feigning indifference. “Perhaps you have. It is but a childish pastime, my lord, nothing more.”

“Well, what does your palm say?

Loki pauses, frowning. He opens his own palm for Thor’s inspection - the fine, long, elegant fingers so unlike Thor’s own.

“Love is not written into my fate,” Loki says softly. “I am destined for a different calling.”

“And that is?”

“To serve.” Loki curls forward and nuzzles his face into Thor’s open palm. He places slow, gentle kisses to the centre of Thor’s palm, then carefully, to each of Thor’s fingertips in turn, with barely a touch of tongue to fuel Thor’s imagination.

“Is this the worthy hand that wields Mjolnir?” Loki murmurs reverently.

He can sense Thor’s magic thrumming under his skin - elemental magic, laced with electricity. Unpredictable, *powerful*. Odin’s magic never felt this. So...charged. Loki shivers.

Loki’s magic is that of illusions: of invisibility, decoys, conjuring. Not as powerful as Thor’s, but certainly more precise. As a obsidian blade. In a sudden flight of fancy, Loki sees himself doing battle at Thor’s side. Loki’s magic would complement Thor’s, granting the god-king more control; Thor’s magic would augment Loki’s, granting Loki more power. Thor would summon a lightning bolt, Loki would aim it for best effect. Their foes would fall before them and plead for mercy. Loki’s brand of magic had always been regarded with suspicion - a trickster’s art - but using it in tandem with another being of equal mettle? Would that not give Loki the legitimacy he’d always craved? The *respect?*

Loki snaps to the present, blinking. The image had been so clear he could swear it was a vision from the Norns themselves. But Loki was never a scryer. And to reveal his magic to the Asgardians would only result in his demise. Loki writes these thoughts off as fabrications of a delusional mind.

“I can see why my father indulged you so,” Thor says. His voice is darker now, and he’s gone strangely still.

Loki looks up, fluttering his eyelashes. He presses Thor’s hand to his cheek. “Am I not worth

spoiling?”

Thor’s lips curl into a smile, a hint of fondness in his eyes. He tilts Loki’s chin up with a gentle finger.

“I would tread carefully if I were you, little Loki. For while I find your spirit amusing, there will come a day, I fear, when you try my patience past its limits.”

“But today is not that day.” Loki says, and Thor laughs.

“Not this day,” Thor echoes. “You can run the water in the bathchamber?”

Loki nods, and Thor rises to his feet, Loki’s hand in his.

“Come along.”

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Thor tugs Loki’s hand as they make their way up towards the Imperial Suite. Loki trails behind dutifully, his other hand clutching the fabric of his shift to keep himself from tripping.

Thor ought to remind Loki how very lucky he is, to have a place in the harem and be left intact. Traditionally, harem boys are castrated to ensure all children borne there are sired by the king. Loki, as far as Thor can tell, has no outer testicles, and Thor could not bring himself to have Loki’s male sex cut off instead, as Amora had requested. Even to Thor, that seems needlessly cruel.

If he’s going to be honest with himself, Thor is getting sick of Amora’s theatrics, of having her constantly challenge him in his own household. Perhaps it was not the right time to summon her back from her country estate. In Thor’s opinion, she could have used more time to recuperate from the birth of their second child. Then again, she would have been miffed to miss his coronation, and Thor was in no mood to deal with *that.*

Thor sighs, stripping himself of his jacket and shirt. Sometimes, he thinks, keeping concubines is more trouble than it’s worth. His father may have had the right idea, choosing to take one queen

and one queen alone. Thor laughs to himself, shaking his head. *True love,* indeed. What a load of nonsense.

"Ready?" He calls, but enters the bathing chamber before Loki has the chance to answer. Loki is crouched at the bath's edge, a finger dipped in the water to test the temperature. He looks up warily at Thor and nods.

The bathing-pool is sunk deep in the floor, with steps leading down into the water and underwater benches upon which the bather can sit. Four marble caryatids spout water out of the vases they hold. A waterfall at one end ensures that the bathwater is constantly flowing. Thor's apartments as Crown Prince had been opulent, but even that is nothing compared to the gilt and luxury of the Imperial Suite. Thor feels giddy. All this is *his* now.

Chief amongst his pretty new acquisitions is Loki, his star dancer. Loki is amusing, and Thor does relish being amused. Thor can never really predict what the runt will do or say. He's pretty to look at, and obedient enough. He'll make a fine concubine and pleasure slave once he lets Thor between his legs.

It had been odd, however, the way he'd cradled Thor's hand, placing such sweet kisses to his fingertips. The gesture did not even feel sexual, or even seductive. And yet it was oddly intimate. Loki is casting a spell on him, just as he did to Odin.

Thor is no simpleton; he knows Loki does these things to earn his favor. As does everyone. Everyone wants something from him. Everyone has an angle. But Thor's favour does not come freely; he expects some service in exchange for his generosity. Thor will get his due from Loki - no matter how long Loki intends to put it off.

In the meantime, Thor looks his fill, enjoying the way Loki's face has flushed a rosy pink. Thor grins to himself, wolfish, and strips himself of the rest of his clothing. He observes, with more than a little satisfaction, how Loki averts his gaze to avoid looking at him.

"Are you shy, sweetheart?" Thor says, utterly shameless in his nakedness. He descends down into the tub, humming with pleasure.

Loki mumbles a reply that Thor doesn't quite catch, since Thor is busy dipping his hair under the water to wet it. He shakes out the excess and scrubs a hand down his face.

With his eyes still firmly rooted to the ground, Loki rises to his feet and bows slightly, as if he means to take his leave.

“I did not dismiss you!” Thor calls with a chuckle. “Come here and attend me.”

“....In with you?”

“Yes,” Thor says. “Keep your clothes on, if that matters so much to you. I’m sure the water will do your muscles good, after all that dance practice.”

“I do not wish to ruin the fine silk your Highness has given me.”

“I’ll buy you new silks. Don’t press me. Come here.”

“It’s rather hot.”

“You’ll get used to it.” He snaps his fingers. “Come. Here.”

Loki obeys, gingerly lowering himself down into the water, displeasure writ plain upon his face. He stays on the opposite end of the bath, looking rather unsure, his shift billowing around him.

“There now.” Thor wades over to him. “This isn’t so bad, is it?”

Still, Loki doesn’t look at him. Dew clings to his skin.

Without warning, Thor grabs him underneath his armpits and dips Loki backwards, so that he is utterly submerged for the briefest moment. Loki yelps and kicks and struggles, but it is of little use against Thor’s limitless strength. Thor sets him back on his feet, laughing all the while. Loki sputters at the ungentle treatment. He flings his now soaked hair off his face indignantly, and finally looks up at Thor, seething.

“Come when I call you, Loki. I should not have to ask more than once.”

Thor has difficulty saying this without laughing, for Loki looks almost impossibly like an irate wet cat. He meant every word of his chastisement, but it's hard to stay angry when Loki is glaring at him like that.

…And also, because of the way the water has made his white shift almost translucent.

Loki seems to notice this at about the same time as Thor does, and he immediately covers his chest in a vain attempt at modesty. Thor is rather charmed.

"You're shy," Thor teases. "I knew it!" He pries Loki's arms away from his chest, revealing the lean, lithe frame; the rosy nipples peeking through wet fabric. A dancer's body. "I'll see you eventually, Loki. It might as well be now."

Loki swallows nervously. When Thor releases his wrists, Loki lets them fall to his side stiffly, not bothering to try to cover himself any longer.

"That's better." Thor leers. "Now, wash me."

Loki wets a cloth in the water and lathers it with sweet-smelling soap. He brings it up to Thor's chest hesitantly, a look of pure concentration on his face. Even still, he stubbornly refuses to meet Thor's eyes. Instead, he stares straight ahead, focusing intently on the task at hand.

"Mmmmm," Thor rumbles, pleased beyond measure with the fortuitous direction his life is taking. He'll be crowned king in three days; he will take up residency in the Imperial suite; and he will fuck this runt until he can't walk straight. Thor can't decide what he's looking forward to most.

Loki dutifully washes Thor's chest, arms, and back, never saying a word. Thor watches him as he works, his cock growing in interest at the sight of Loki's lovely pale skin half-hidden underneath the wet silk. He even lets Loki wash his hair and comb out the tangles.

At length, Loki faces him once more. He seems flushed, and his eyes are strangely unfocused. Thor puffs up his chest; this is the usual effect he has on maidens.

Loki stands there awkwardly, waiting to be dismissed. But Thor is not finished with him. Not yet.

“I believe you missed something,” Thor says, grabbing Loki’s wrist and guiding it below the water and towards Thor’s impressive erection.

Loki lets out a noise of surprise. He tries to curl away, but Thor’s grip is firm and unyielding.

“Stroke me,” Thor commands. “Come on, pet. Let’s see if those hands are as nimble as the rest of you.” He grunts as Loki’s delicate fingers wraps around his length. Loki can’t even reach all the way around it!

“Oh,” Is all Loki says, and Thor laughs predatorily.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” He taunts, closing Loki’s fingers more insistently around it and bending over to rasp into Loki’s ear: “Now imagine it inside you, stretching you open, filling you so completely, in your cunt, your mouth, your ass. You won’t ever be satisfied by another man ever again, not after I’ve had you.”

Loki whimpers, unable to pull himself away. “Your Highness, please. It’s too hot.”

“Come on then, stroke me,” Thor encourages. “That’s it. Be good, slave. My little slave.”

Loki *is* his slave. Thor owns him completely: body, mind, heart. He can do with him what he likes. Who is he to deny Thor his flesh? Why should Thor be satisfied with spilling into Loki’s fist when there are much sweeter pleasures to be had? Pleasures that are his to claim by right?

Thor decides, then and there, that he should not have to wait. Loki should have never asked him to in the first place. Thor is King in all but name and he will not be denied.

Thor is almost impossibly hard, and he ruts impatiently against Loki. His lust has frayed his self-control, and not even Loki’s soft protests can dissuade him from his single-minded goal. Thor manhandles Loki up against a caryatid and presses himself flush against Loki’s body. Loki squirms, pushing weakly against the solid mass of Thor’s chest.

“Master,” Loki says, his voice breathless, “Not yet. Not yet. Please. Let me up...”

Thor ignores him, choosing instead to tug Loki's head to the side with a fistful of lush hair, thus exposing Loki's long, swan-like neck. Thor plants hungry kisses on the porcelain skin there and laps at the moisture, making Loki's breath hitch. He likes this, Thor knows he does. He's just toying with Thor. He probably laughs at Thor when he's alone, congratulating himself for having subdued Thor for so long!

"Three more days," Loki pleads, "And you will be King, and I will willingly lie down for you. Please, I can't breathe….."

"Why do you care so much? Hm? What difference does it make whether it's tonight or tomorrow night or ten nights from now? You're mine to do with as I please!"

"Master, please," Loki whimpers. "It's too hot, I can't...I can't breathe...."

Thor is about to tear his clothing off anyway, lay him on the bath's edge and sink his cock into Lokis's sweet heat, when Loki's eyes roll into the back of his head and his body goes limp in Thor's arms.

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Thor paces as the Healer listens to Loki's heart through her stethoscope. It had been alarming to have Loki faint like that, and Thor was surprised at just how intense his response had been. Thor scooped Loki's limp body out of the bath, still dripping, and laid him on the couch in the antechamber, calling for a healer at once. He'd barely gotten a bathrobe on himself and a towel around Loki by the time she'd arrived.

"Well?" Thor demands.

"I know little of Jotun physiology," she says calmly, "But I do believe he became overheated."

Thor's neck suddenly feels quite hot. He knows full well that if that is the case, then Loki's present condition is entirely his own fault.

"Will he be alright?"

Before she has a chance to respond, Loki stirs, blinking against the light.

“Loki,” Thor bullies the healer out of his way.

“I want it to - to mean something.” Loki murmurs, his voice laboured.

Thor frowns, uncomprehending. “What?”

“I want it to mean something.” Loki says, more clearly. “To you.”

“Mean what? What are you talking about?”

“My first time.” Loki sits up weakly. He looks to a nearby servant. “Water, please.” Loki takes the glass that’s offered to him, sipping from it daintily.

It takes a moment for this information to sink in.

“*Your first time?"* Thor repeats incredulously."*You,* a virgin? Why didn’t you tell me so?”

“Would you have even believed me if I had?” Loki counters, daring to meet Thor’s eyes for the briefest second. “You don’t even believe me now. When first we met, you already decided I was your father’s whore. I knew I could do little to convince you. There was no point in trying.”

Well...that’s probably true, Thor concedes. Thor squares his shoulders defensively, “But you *were* gifted to him for that purpose.”

“Yes,” Loki says.

“For my father’s,” Thor says distastefully, “ *...comfort.”*

“He never bed me. Odin-king could not bring himself to do so, for whatever reason; I know not. But I swear it is true, I was untouched when I entered his possession, and remain so now.”

Thor considers this carefully. “I think you try to increase your worth to me.”

“Does it?” Loki asks. “Increase my worth?”

“Immensely,” Thor says, a dark glint forming in his eye. He’s been known to have a bit of a penchant for popping virgins.

Loki lets out a mirthless, self-deprecating chuckle. “I suppose I wanted…...to share in your glory, in some small way. I know I am a fool for believing I could be special to you. I am a silly, vain creature, and always have been. But surely there is no greater honor than to warm the bed of a king, on the very night he ascends to the throne? And I had thought -” Loki pauses.

“What?” Thor prods. “Tell me.”

Loki laughs again, softly, self-consciously. “I thought that maybe, just maybe, when you look back upon that night, many many years from now, you might remember our time together, and think of me with some fondness.” He seems embarrassed by this confession. He looks away, mumbling, “Your highness is good to humor me.”

“I felt no barrier inside you.”

“Be that as it may, I’ve had no man,” Loki says staunchly. “Have me examined if that would satisfy you. But please, do not be angry. I did not know how to make you believe me.”

“Very well,” Thor says, although stops short of apologizing for nearly boiling Loki in the bath. He’ll have to take more care in the future. He forgets, sometimes, that Loki is not born of Asgard. He’s of delicate constitution. Thor should not have handled him so roughly.

He sends Loki to bed shortly thereafter, accompanied by an attendant to make sure he reaches his harem cell safely. Loki needs his rest. *Thor* need his rest. He’d let his lust get the best of him. Thor has the niggling feeling that he’d gone a bit too far, that he might’ve seriously harmed Loki this time. Thor is not used to this sensation and does his best to ignore it.

By tradition, Thor cannot sleep in the Imperial Bedchamber until he's crowned, so he expends what little energy he has left trudging back to his old suite. He hasn't even the will to make himself come by his own hand, and he falls asleep with his hair still damp.

***

"So..?"

"He is not intact, Highness," the healer reports. This is as Thor suspected, and comes as no surprise. "But I have found no evidence that he has known a man intimately. There is no lover's mark upon his anima."

"But he is torn."

"Aye," she agrees, "It is possible for a maidenhead to pop with any vigorous activity, like horseback riding, or even strenuous exercise. Loki is a dancer; I suspect that is how it came to happen."

"Hm. Good." Thor says, half to himself. Shame there will be no blood, then. Ah well. It's the principle of the thing, Thor supposes. So long as he's the first man to spill inside him, that's all that really matters. It's a relief to know for certain that his father hadn't had Loki first.

"Although…" she says, hesitating. Thor immediately turns his attention back to her. "There's else something Your Highness should know…."

She shifts nervously, and Thor prompts he to go on.

"As I was using my seidr to inspect him, I found within him a well of magic. A deep well."

"*What?* That's…."

Impossible.

The healer purses her lips. "My prince, it appears that Loki is a witch.”

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year! have some of.....whatever this is.

apologies for any errors xox

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Loki can't recall how Helblindi proposed his plan to him in the first place - if he'd eased Loki into it, or if he sprang it on him all at once. Loki had been in a fog; his thoughts clouding over with the mounting horror that Helblindi is being completely serious.

When he finally can bring himself to speak, his voice is little more than a whisper.

"What you're suggesting is absurd. Impossible. It can't be done. How could you even -" Loki's words get caught in his throat. Loki had learned not to expect much compassion from his elder brother - especially after what happened - but this is truly beyond the pale.

Helblindi sighs. "What else am I to do with you? Marry you to that old codger out on the Wastelands, to eek out a living on the ice sheets? Is that what you want?"

Loki bristles, even though this not news to him. No one else will have him - no one of any standing, anyway. But Loki is proud, and refuses to let shame overcome him. He clenches his fists in indignation.

"I didn't spend the last ten years training with the best dance master in Jotunheim just to grind in some old man's lap like a harlot!"

The slap he receives isn't entirely unexpected, but it stings nonetheless. Loki rubs his purpling cheek and glares defiantly up at his brother.

"Training I paid for!" Helblindi roars. "So you'll do as I say. Prideful wretch!"

"I won't go," Loki says impulsively. "I won't do it."

“You will.” Helblindi. “It is Laufey’s wish.”

“You might as well sentence me to death!” Loki screams, his composure fraying. He paces, itching to expend some of his anxious energy. Laufey’s spite runs deep, it seems. “The Aesir hate us, have made war with us for centuries.The Allfather would never fall for such a trick!”

“Is it any worse than the fate you would otherwise suffer?” Helblindi shouts back. Then he sighs, approaching Loki with a sudden air of gentleness. “The Allfather is weak and senile. His mind is dulled. He is vulnerable. Our kind may be hated, but a jotunn runtling? One as small and delicate as you? No, you will pose no threat to him. You will be meek and submissive and sweet. You, my beautiful brother,” Helblindi takes Loki’s face in his massive hands. “You will charm his secrets from him.”

Loki laughs bitterly, hoping that will somehow counteract the wetness that threatens to spill over his eyelashes. “You would have me lie down for our enemy, to sate Laufey’s thirst for revenge.”

And your thirst for royal favour, Loki doesn’t say.

“Sacrifices must be made,” Helblindi says gravely. “For the good of Jotunheim.”

“Then I am the sacrificial lamb,” Loki spits, wriggling out of Helblindi’s grasp. He’s not fooled by Helblindi’s false patriotism; not for a moment. The only person Helblindi serves is himself, and Loki hates him for pretending otherwise. “Why should I go through with this, if only you stand to gain?”

“Why, for our people, of course,” Helblindi says, his eyebrows shooting up. “For our majestic Realm, and for the repatriation of our beloved Casket.”

“Funny,” Loki says dryly.

Helblindi grins, wolfish, like he’s laid a perfect trap and Loki’s about to get caught in it. “Because,” He begins, red eyes glinting, “If you succeed, I will restore your dowry to you, the Estate at Herjofsil included.”

Loki perks up. His dowry…..

“Ah,” Helblindi smirks triumphantly. “I knew that would get your attention.”

Loki’s mouth goes dry. “I thought….”

“I have discussed the matter with Laufey. Your right to it has been forfeited, but not entirely lost. There would be cause to restore it to you. Your emancipation would be quite unprecedented, but - “ He shrugs, “Extraordinary circumstances, after all.”

Extraordinary circumstances, indeed! To return alive would be nothing less than a miracle. What Helblindi asks is suicide. If he’s discovered to be a Jotunn spy, he will die upon the rack, he knows it. And even if he’s not discovered…..Loki shudders to think what Odin might ask him to do - if he even makes it into the old man’s bed at all, that is. The more he thinks about this, the more absurd it all seems.

But on the other hand -

“You swear it? That if I go through with this…..you will emancipate me, and transfer my dowry to my name?”

“Upon my word and honour,” Helblindi agrees.

Loki closes his eyes, exhaling through his nose. He can’t believe he’s seriously considering this!

“I probably won’t ever make it back.”

“Yes, this mission is not without risk,” Helblindi says airily. The prospect of losing Loki is clearly not something that causes him heartbreak. Loki doesn’t know what that stings as much as it does, or why he’s even surprised. “Which is why Laufey-King will match your dowry as a reward for your service. And, of course, as compensation for your ruined honor.”

“Match it?” Loki repeats incredulously. A wave of greed washes over him. Double his dowry….would be more than enough to live out his days in comfort and peace, free of the bonds of

Helblindi's guardianship. Free of his duty to marry the suitor of Helblindi's choosing. He'd sacrifice his honour a thousand times over for that chance.

"Freedom," Helblindi says, reading Loki's mind. "It's what you've always wanted."

"Freedom from you." Loki corrects. Helblindi narrows his red eyes, but doesn't answer.

They fall silent for a long while as Loki continues to pace.

"It's perhaps stupid of me to ask," Loki says, "but how will I even be granted an audience with Odin? You cannot think to simply teleport me into his chambers! And even if you do get me in, will he even want me, as I am?" Loki waves his hands over his blue body in emphasis. "This cannot possibly work! Have you even considered the logistics? Do you even know the Asgardians wouldn't gut me on sight?"

Helblindi's oily smile grows tenfold. "Leave all that to me."

***

Thor sends him a pretty new hairclip. It's in the shape of a dragonfly, with enamel wings and an vibrant sapphire set into the thorax. Loki breaks out into wild, crazed laughter when the page brings it to him, and he immediately sets about arranging his hair to best show it off. It's his first real gift from Thor. He hopes Amora is around to see it. He'll wear it incessantly until she does.

But really, the gift itself is besides the point. While Loki's never been one to turn down pretty baubles - especially of the expensive variety - Thor's remorse is the greater prize by far. Ha! He isn't as invulnerable to Loki's charms as he'd first made it seem. Loki will bring him to heel. A few honeysweet words of devotion can turn a man into soft, malleable clay. True, Loki may have underestimated the force of Thor's passion, but he figures he'd played it well in the end.

The little fainting damsel. Loki could almost roll his eyes at himself. It *was* a brilliant move though, and expertly executed too. Frankly, it was the only way Loki could think to get Thor off him. Loki had to weasel out from under Thor somehow; it's not like he could fight him off. But neither was he about to let Thor derail his plans before they could come to fruition. Loki is determined to make Thor wait until the night of the coronation. And if Thor feels bad about the way he'd behaved - all the better.

The next day passes without incident; or, with as little incident as can be expected given the circumstances. Thor does not send for him, but Loki suspects that's because he's occupied with preparations for the coronation. A celebration like this only comes once every few thousand years, and from what Loki understands, the festivities are scheduled to last for months.

Loki, too, is being kept busy. The dance chorus does a full dress rehearsal in the throne room, complete with costume changes, lighting, and orchestral accompaniment. The palace mages have enchanted the ceiling to mimic the Aurora, and Loki spends most of his downtime between sets looking up, awed at the display of their magical prowess. The Aurora complements his dance perfectly, so that when the music picks up near the end, the light goes from a mellow, sombre blue to a triumphant golden yellow.

Loki's solo costume is beautiful - white, trimmed with red and gold, slung over one shoulder - and much more lavish than his chorus costume. Loki rather likes the way it shows his figure off. The silk billows behind him when he leaps, the gold thread catches the light with every movement. Upon finishing rehearsals, however, he notices that one of the seams has come undone. Loki is hustled to the master seamstress for an emergency touch-up fitting, and it is there that the two Einherjar come for him.

His seamstress looks up from the hem, startled, and accidentally pricks Loki with a pin. Loki covers his bare chest with his hands and he hisses in indignation at being intruded on in such a brazen manner. The guards tell him to come with them.

"For what purpose?" Loki asks. They don't say, but their faces make it clear he is in no position to refuse. Something is amiss. Thor has never sent for him during the day like this, and if he did, he would have used a page. Not two fully armed guards.

"Can it wait?" Loki asks, less confident now. He's barely dressed, his costume half-laced and half-hanging from his hips. He laughs softly with a self-conscious shrug, "I am indisposed."

They indicate for Loki to hurry up. No, it cannot wait.

"Well, I can't dress with you standing there. Wait in the hall."

"You are to accompany us immediately. If you will not change, then you can come as you are."

Loki grimaces; he likes that option much less.

He snarls, *fine*. The seamstress does her best to shield him as Loki changes into his normal silks, but even so, Loki's sure they catch glimpses of his bare flesh. And although he's technically a pleasure slave, there's still haughty, aristocratic blood flowing in his veins, and Loki bristles at the thought of being looked at by their common eyes.

By the time they reach Thor's private audience chamber, it's clear that something is definitely wrong. For one, Thor isn't smiling. He sits strangely still upon his throne, his stare icy and penetrating, and he says nothing as Loki is set before him. The armour and cape make him look half again his size, more god than man. Loki isn't used to seeing him like this. Usually, Loki attends him in the evenings, when he's changed out of his armor and into comfortable casual robes. By that time of night, Thor's usually had a few glasses of wine, he's been fed, and is in good spirits.

Loki kneels all the way to the ground, then back up again, and schools his face into servile neutrality.

"Leave us," Thor says to the guards stationed behind Loki. They bow and exit, their footsteps echoing loudly in the cavernous hall. Thor waits until the doors slam shut behind them before he speaks again.

"Do you like your hairclip?"

"Very much," Loki replies uneasily, although it's the truth, he does. He's glad he'd elected to wear it today. It used to please Odin greatly when Loki wore the gifts he'd been given.

Thor hums, but the sound seems cold, even mocking.

"I acquired it long ago, while on a diplomatic mission to Vanaheim. Rather costly, but I was taken with the design, and I knew I had to have it. It's that sapphire in the centre. A rare specimen."

Loki nods, unsure of where Thor is going with this. "Your Highness is most generous to have given it to me."

"Sapphires represent a promise of honesty, loyalty, and trust when worn by a lover." Thor's voice is low and full of quiet menace. "Do you know why I have summoned you thus?"

Loki shakes his head quickly. “No, Highness.”

Thor leans forward in his chair.

“I think you do. I think you know exactly why you’re here.” The false veneer of calm cracks, and underneath it is something dark, primal, and frightening. “You’ve been playing me for a fool.”

Loki’s mouth goes dry. “My lord, I don’t -”

“No longer!” Thor roars. “I will have no more lies. You know perfectly well of what I speak.”

In a panic, Loki wonders if the healer had found traces of Ulfr’s touch on his anima - but no. Loki dismisses that thought just as quickly. Loki is still a virgin, because they hadn’t done anything. *They hadn’t done anything*. Not really. Nothing that would leave a lover’s mark on him. He was inspected before he left Jotunheim! He came out clean. Ruptured, but clean -

“Your magic,” Thor snarls, interrupting Loki’s line of thought. “*Witch.”*

Oh. The magic.

That’s much worse.

Loki’s heart rate spikes, like a mad hummingbird trapped in his chest. He *knew* something was off about that healer! She’d acted so stiffly throughout his examination. She’d probed too deep, and Loki hadn’t been paying attention, preoccupied as he was with the worry that she’d find some lingering love-stain.

Thor’s face is dark, and his voice booms across the audience chamber, rattling Loki’s bones.

“It is common knowledge that all magic-wielders in the Realm must be registered. You, little one, are not on record, even though my healer says you’ve an impressive well of magic within you. Do you deny it?”

Loki's head is in a tizzy. He feels faint, and worst of all, powerless. His first instinct is to deny, but he knows better than to do so. It would only make things worse for himself.

"No, my lord."

"Then you knowingly broke the law."

Loki opens his hands imploringly. "Master, please. I can -"

"Silence!" Thor barks, cutting Loki short. "You knowingly broke the law, *slave*; yes or no."

Loki hates the way Thor calls him that, like he wants to put Loki in his place; to remind Loki that his fate is totally in Thor's hands. Which it is.

"Yes," Loki says, voice barely above a whisper.

"Then you kept this secret from my father for all this time. Even while you lay in his arms and slept by his side." He gets up and stalks towards Loki. "You're a little snake, that's what you are. And my father was a fool for ever letting you into his bed. That senile, lovestruck old cretin. You must have truly bewitched him, for him to have made such a grievous oversight."

"I meant no harm by it, Your Highness, I swear- "

Loki flinches when Thor draws closer, convinced his master will strike him. He curls in on himself, eyes squeezed shut, and waits, the blood rushing in his ears.

But the blow doesn't come. When he opens his eyes, Thor's finger is pointed in his face; his blue eyes narrowed into furious slits.

Thor speaks slowly. "Give me one reason why I shouldn't bind you."

Loki swallows dryly; his tongue feels thick in his mouth. The truth is, Loki doesn't really have a good reason. Thor *ought* to bind his magic for this, at the very least. It's what Loki would do in his place. A magicked foreign slave, so intimately associated with the King of Asgard? There is potential for a great…..calamity. Thor is right to call him a snake.

But it's not in Loki to give in without a fight.

"If it means anything, my lord, I…." Loki can hardly form the words, "...I used my gifts to give your father comfort in his old age. I put him to sleep, soothed his cough, eased the pain from the arthritis in his fingers. I wanted to help him, I *cared* for him. He saved me from - from Norns know what kind of fate. I owe him my life." Loki knows he is rambling, truly panicked that Thor will follow through on his threat. His magic is his safety line; the only security he has left in this enemy kingdom. The thought of losing it is terrifying. "I never did anything to harm him. I couldn't possibly."

"Healing spells," Thor says.

Loki should just nod and say nothing more. Healing magic is the most benign of all magickal arts. Surely Thor would not object to owning a slave who works healing magic? Loki's hands can warm and soothe and comfort. But…..if Loki volunteers some information, perhaps Thor will be more inclined to believe him.

"Some illusion magic, too. Children's spells. Parlour tricks." Loki smiles nervously, a pathetic supplicating gesture. "Harmless."

Thor tilts his head back, looking Loki up and down, mulling over this information.

"If you loved my father - as you say - you would have told him the truth."

"Your HIghness is right," Loki says. "I have no excuse other than that I was afraid."

"*Afraid,*" Thor sneers. "You had him wrapped around your finger."

Loki summons what is left of his courage. He thinks Thor had felt some compassion for him that day when he'd pretended to faint - had the king not seen to his recovery himself? Laid him on his couch and summoned a healer to his side? Loki knows they had gotten off on the wrong foot when

they'd first met, but surely there is some mercy in his heart for as pitiable a creature as Loki!

"I have been a slave for as long as I can remember," Loki begins. "My fate was sealed when my hair did not shed, and I was discovered to be a runtling. I have lived in uncertainty and fear all my life, ripped from my home and smuggled to a foreign land not known for its hospitality to my kind. They told me I was destined to warm the bed of the King of Asgard and I…. I was afraid. I was young. I have since resigned myself to a life of servitude - indeed, it would be the greatest honour of my life to serve you as I have served your father - but please believe me when I say I have not kept this secret out of ill-will; only a misplaced sense of self-preservation. My gifts are meagre, but I would gladly make use of them in whatever capacity Your Highness so chooses….."

Loki adds a hint of suggestion in his voice, to perhaps pique Thor's interest. He thinks he succeeds, by the way Thor is suddenly given pause.

"I don't like it," Thor says at length. "It makes me think I can't trust you. It makes me think you're keeping secrets from me." His eyes narrow. "What else have you been hiding, Loki?"

In a fit of madness, Loki considers telling him the truth. The whole truth. About Ulfr, about Helblindi, Laufey, everything. About his lost inheritance. About the promise of freedom should he make it back to Jotunheim alive. What would Thor do?

What if Loki fell to his knees and begged Thor's mercy. What if he forfeited allegiance to Jotunheim, turned his back on his homeland forever, and swore fealty to Asgard instead. What if he cried until his eyes were swollen shut, so that Thor would never doubt the depth of his remorse. Loki could call forth such tears! Loki had but to let fall a single crystal tear and Odin would rush to kiss his cheek and promise him anything to make him smile again.

Would it be so bad, Loki thinks, to stay here and be Thor's slave and concubine? He could live well like this, once he has tamed the king's base passions. He wouldn't have to work another day in his life. He could live his days in leisure, with slaves of his own, even. Maybe pop out a few brats to secure his position. A gilded cage, to be sure, but Loki has never been destined for freedom. And Thor - well. Loki could certainly do worse for a bedmate than the Golden King of Asgard.

If Loki were going to say anything, now would be his chance. After this, there would be no going back.

"Nothing else," Loki says, hating how small his voice sounds. "Highness."

Thor crosses his arms in front of his massive chest, and for a horrible moment he thinks Thor sees through the lie.

Thor says, “Show me.”

Loki blinks. “Sh…..show you?”

“Aye.” Thor says a hint of irritation in his voice. “I want to see what you can do, slave. Show me your magic.”

Loki startles at the command. It certainly wasn’t what Loki was expecting, and he finds himself rather at a loss. He mentally cycles through his spells for the one that would best suit his cause. So many come across as rather…..shady.

Loki takes a deep breaths. His fingers tremble, and he’s sure it would take a few tries to make this cast correctly. He hadn’t done it in years. Ages. Not since he left Jotunheim.

Thor’s stare is unsettling, but Loki manages to collect himself enough to focus on the spell. First comes the white smoke, hovering in a cloud at his feet. Loki concentrates harder, palms open to the floor, until the smoke takes shape and the familiar figure of his totem materializes. The rabbit makes a few small cautious hops towards Loki to sniff at his ankles in greeting. Its fur is opalescent, luminous, and almost translucently white. As a youngling, he used to summon it to bring himself comfort when he felt afraid and lonely at night. Even now, its presence is soothing; it must sense Loki’s distress, and its first instinct is to comfort. Loki used to resent that his totem was not something more….*intimidating*, like Helblindi’s direwolf, but he’s since come to appreciate his rabbit’s less obvious strengths. It might be small, but it is also swift, agile, and most importantly, cunning.

Loki lifts his wrists and the rabbit goes sprinting, its rear dissolving into a trail of light like the tail of a comet. It darts to and fro in a sharp zig zag, across the audience chamber and back again. Loki has it do a few laps around the throne room, nipping behind him and Thor, before he finally brings it back to settle at his feet. It sits on its rear imploringly, looking up at Loki with jet black eyes, its front paws tucked against its belly.

Loki smiles softly. His totem has missed him. Loki has missed it too.

Loki crouches down and scoops his rabbit up. Its fur is as soft and warm as Loki remembers. Loki

cradles his rabbit against his chest, curling his body around it and making soft cooing noises. The rabbit nuzzles into its patron affectionately, seeking to calm Loki's nerves, but Loki can tell it's ill at ease too. It doesn't like Thor. Or, at least, it's wary of Thor.

Thor reaches forwards cautiously, meaning to pet the rabbit's fur. The rabbit freezes, so still that even its tiny nose ceases wriggling. Loki wills it to be calm and makes a shushing noise. When Thor finally trails his hand over the rabbit's fur, Loki swears he feels it too, like a shiver reverberating down his spine. It's a strange sensation, given that Loki hadn't expected to feel anything at all. He'd never let anyone touch it before. He dissolves his totem into white smoke before Thor can do it again.

It feels odd to have exposed such an intimate side of himself to Thor, but Loki never does anything without careful consideration. He needs for Thor to not see him as a threat. And this? What could be more unthreatening than *this?*

"Harmless." Loki says again, voice barely above a whisper.

Thor is silent for a long while; his expression strangely blank and unreadable.

"This deceit cannot go unpunished,' Thor says, then lets out a long sigh and closes his eyes for much longer than a blink. When he speaks again, his voice is softer than it was before. "If you are to lie in my bed, Loki, I must be able to trust you."

Loki nods eagerly. Thor seems hesitant now - even unwilling. He doesn't want to punish him, Loki realizes. *He doesn't want to punish him.* He wants Loki underneath him, not imprisoned under the ground. And Loki will do whatever he can to encourage that sentiment.

"I will gladly endure whatever punishment Your Highness sees fit to issue."

"You beguile me even now," Thor mutters, scrubbing a hand over his face. "Maybe I *have* been bewitched by you."

"There are no such thing as love spells," Loki echoes. He adds, perhaps against his better judgement, "But if there were, I would have certainly put one on you."

Loki smiles weakly at his limp joke, but Thor, in disbelief, actually half-laughs, and shakes his

head.

“What am I to do with you,” he says in exasperation, more to himself than anything else.

Loki has a few suggestions, but the question seems like a rhetorical one, and he holds his tongue. Behind him, the door creaks open, and Thor’s attention is diverted to somewhere beyond Loki’s shoulder.

“What?” Thor barks, the harsh tone back in his voice.

“Apologies, my prince,” Loki hears the meek voice of Thor’s head steward, “But you are needed before council on the matter of - “

Thor waves him away as one would a pesky fly, a sour look on his face. “I know, I know. I will be but a moment.”

He looks back down at Loki, his lips pursed like he knows he’s pressed for time.

“Loki,” Thor says, his voice echoing off the gilded walls, “For your deception, and for the crime of concealing your magic from official records, I sentence you to one night in the Underground, so that you will know what terrible fate lies in store for those who betray the King of Asgard.”

Loki lets out the biggest exhale of his life. Relief floods over him, and he sinks to his knees.

“Thank you, Highness,” Loki babbles, bowing down until his forehead presses against the cool marble floor at Thor’s feet. “Thank you. Thank you. I am unworthy of your kindness.”

“One night,” Thor repeats. His hand is in Loki’s hair, smoothing down the wayward strands and thumbing thoughtfully at the hairclip. “And I will have you retrieved so you may attend my coronation, and dance as I have bid you. There would be no greater waste than to have your beauty rot away in some dank prison cell. One such as you is meant to be *seen.*”

Loki hazards a glace up then, and is relieved to find that the anger has dissolved from Thor’s face. In its place, a heavy, rather uncharacteristic weariness. “Do not give me cause to do this to you

again, for next time I will not show you mercy."

"I won't," Loki breathes, although he's not sure how he can make such a promise. He kisses Thor's hand. "I won't, I swear it."

Loki feels wetness at his eyelashes. He's so relieved he could cry. Perhaps he will, later.

"Until tomorrow," Thor says, straightening. He cups Loki's cheek briefly, then the soft glimmer in his eyes dims. WIth a flourish of his red cape, he storms out of the audience chamber.

Thor booms, "Take him Underground."

***

Loki lets out several shaky breaths. The elevator creaks and groans as it carries him deep, deep Underground, into the bowels of the mountain upon which Asgard is built. The metal-on-metal sound makes Loki's teeth and gums ache. Loki envisions the chain snapping, sending him plummeting to his death. His knees wobble at the thought. How deep does the shaft go?

Just one night. One night.

This punishment is nothing. Loki ought to be relieved. He'd seen Helblindi execute slaves for much less - left to die in an oubliette for spilling a drop of his favourite wine. And Loki just got away with treason! He should laugh at Thor's foolishness. Thor, King of Asgard, swayed by something as trite as Loki's wobbling lip.

But instead, Loki is a wreck. The air is stale and musty down here, unventilated, and tainted with a sour, metallic smell. He *can* breathe. He can. It's just one night.

At last, the elevator grinds to a halt with a mighty clatter. Loki stumbles on his feet, but the two guards behind him keep him steady. The grate is opened before them and Loki is ushered into the central hall of the Underground. It's much more open than Loki had expected, although the smell is considerably more intense. The halls look hewn from solid rock, more like the inside of an anthill than a proper dungeon. Strange, blueish mushrooms cast deathly bioluminescent light over

the naked passageways, which extend outwards in every direction from the central hall. This place feels ancient, like the roots of Yggdrasil itself. Its walls seem to throb, pressing down on Loki's magic. Something about this place inhibits spellcraft - maybe it's the walls, maybe the smell. Whatever it is, it's making Loki's jaw clench involuntarily.

Just one night.

Loki's is ushered towards a small alcove with a desk and a few chests. There is a gaunt, pale man seated behind it, taking notes with a quill.

"This is the new one," he says, not looking up. His posture is ramrod straight, and his voice is rough like gravel, as though he does not use it often.

"Aye," A guard affirms, pushing Loki forwards. The other guard hands the warden the official papers bearing Thor's seal. The warden pops the decree and scans the document cursorily.

"Magic charges," he says at length. "Treason against your King and Master. Sentenced to…." his brow shoots up, "A single night." He glances up, skimming his milky eyes over Loki's shivering frame; a bland, almost distasteful look upon his face. It's obvious to him why Loki got off so leniently.

"To be released at sunrise tomorrow morning," the warden continues. "No doubt in time for His Imperial Highness' coronation."

Loki shuffles on his feet, curling in on himself. There's a damp chill that even his Jotunn blood cannot protect against. The walls are definitely thrumming, a sound so low Loki can't hear it, but it rattles his bones nonetheless. Everything is pressing downwards, and the air is damp and thick. Someone, somewhere is wheezing, like they can't inhale properly.

"Do you understand the nature of the charges laid against you?"

"Yes," Loki says.

The warden dips his pen in the inkwell and scribbles something Loki can't make out. "Give him cell number fifty two." He motions to the chest against the wall with his quill. "Bedding is in there."

Loki pauses a beat, then realizes the warden meant for Loki to fetch the bedding himself. He crouches down and opens the chest, pulling out a set of scratchy folded blankets and a single pillow. Even now, he can't disregard his high-born sensibilities, and he wrinkles his nose at the thought of who had used them before. Fleetingly, he had hoped Thor would have provided some small creature comforts for his stay….but then again, he supposes this too is part of his punishment.

The warden waves him off, and Loki is led down one of the tunnels to his room for the night. The cells here too are carved from solid rock, with rows of bars to separate the cells from the passageways. Loki makes the mistake of looking into one of the cells, into the beady, vacant eyes of some wretched prisoner, so haggard he is little more than an animated corpse.

Loki lowers his gaze to the ground before him and clutches his bedding closer to his chest. This Hel is a place for traitors. And because Loki's master is the King of Asgard, any slight against Thor's person could be construed as treason. If Loki had known that before he left Jotunheim, he wouldn't have agreed to this mission in the first place. He wonders bleakly if Helblindi knew it and sent him anyway.

"Number fifty-two," his escort says, and unlocks the gate of the cell at the very end of the cellblock. Loki is pushed gently forwards, and he closes his eyes until the gate locks behind him. The foreboding *clank* of his cell door makes everything seem so final. If indeed it was Thor's intention to make Loki envision a lifetime down here in this dank pit, he's certainly succeeded.

Loki sits himself on his barren little cot and curls in on himself, wrapping his arms around his bended knees. Alone now, he lets himself succumb to the terror that's been plaguing him ever since the guards first came for him. His eyes mist, and Loki lets out a shaky sob. This place is cursed, unnatural. It's stupid to let himself get so emotional, given his paltry sentence, but Loki can't shake the thought there may come a day when Thor finally discovers the true extent of his treachery. And on that day, Thor will not be merciful enough to grant him death, even if Loki begged for it. This is the grim fate that awaits traitors against the Crown. Loki would sooner fling himself off Asgard's highest tower than live out a life sentence like this. Idly, Loki muses that he should've told the truth when he had the chance.

Loki mops his face with his woolen sleeve, even though it makes his face itch. He longs for the comfort of his harem cell, and he kicks himself for ever disparaging it. There at least, he could open a window and let the cool breeze lull him to sleep. Or better yet, Loki thinks of his childhood bed back in Jotunheim, outfitted with plush comfortable furs. He used to drink warm frothed milk and read books into the night, even when he was explicitly told not to. His old nurse Gunni would sneak them into his bedroom. Loki could never pace himself with it came to books.

But mostly, Loki thinks of Odin's bed, and the way Odin used to smile and open his arms to welcome Loki into his embrace. Loki had felt so safe, so cared for then. He wishes he hadn't so often rolled his eyes when Odin wasn't looking. He was a good man. Delusional, perhaps, but a good man. And nobody misses him - not when they have such a handsome, vigorous new king to take his place. Even his own son was eager to get him out of the way. Loki is probably the only one who thinks of him at all anymore.

Loki clutches his blankets more tightly around his shoulders. He's grateful the cell opposite his is empty, at least. There is no one here to witness his tears.

Loki takes a few more deep, cleansing inhales through his mouth until his breath stops hitching. He can do this. He has to; there is no other way but forward. He has planted a seed of affection in Thor's heart, and now all he has to do is nurture it to blossom. When he finally lies down for Thor, he will make it so good for him, Thor won't ever think of summoning anyone else to his bed. The first step, Loki thinks, will be getting Thor to kiss him. How could Thor think of him as anything other than a pleasure slave if he won't even deign to kiss him?

Look Thor in the eyes. Yes, that's another thing.

Loki must get through the coronation and execute his dance to perfection. Loki is confident with his solo - he'd certainly practiced it enough - but the thought of performing it makes his stomach knot. His entire plan hinges on it going well. If Loki pulls this off, he will never ever be forgotten -

Loki sits up suddenly and blinks away the residual tears as he's struck with what might possibly be the most ridiculous idea he's ever had.

Loki shakes his head at himself and laughs crazily. No. It's much too risky. Given everything he's just been through? What he currently endures? It's madness! He's a fool for even considering it.

He huffs, laying himself back down. He tries to turn his thoughts elsewhere, but the idea has taken root, and will not let itself be cast aside so easily. Loki chews his lip as he lets it persuade him. Thor *did* say he wanted Loki to give them something they've never seen before, did he not?

He'll decide in the morning, once this night has been had. He doubts he'll sleep, but he closes his eyes anyway and wills himself to settle down. Tomorrow is Thor's coronation, and if all goes well, by nightfall, Loki will have reclaimed his rightful place upon the satin sheets of the Imperial suite - his rightful place at Thor's side.

Until then, all he can do is wait.

***

They come for Loki an indiscernible amount of time later; it must have only been hours, but it feels like much, much longer, like time itself has been muffled under the rock. Loki is bleary-eyed, his neck aches, and he's in dire need of a bath. Nonetheless, he's on his feet the moment the guards come for him. He doesn't think he could stand another moment down here, and his eagerness to be released borders on the hysterical. In a moment of despair, Loki thought Thor had changed his mind and prolonged his sentence out of spite. But Loki oughtn't have worried; he is released at sunrise just as Thor had decreed. Despite all his many faults, the King of Asgard is a man of his word.

The ride up feels like an ascension into Valhalla. Loki feels like he can *breathe,* at last, after having been suffocated under the earth. As they reach closer and closer to the surface, the horrid thrumming fades, and Loki senses his magic being incrementally restored to him. It takes Loki several minutes for his eyes to adjust to the brightness of the early morning. He's never been so grateful to see the rising sun.

Even though most of the guests still sleep, the palace is already abuzz with excitement. Servants scramble to make last minute preparations, and Loki suspects they've been kept busy all night. Bouquets of flowers and red banners proclaim the glory of the new King and hail the triumphant new era. All this fuss for one man. It all feels very surreal. It's also something of a shock to the system, given how Loki had spent the night. And soon, Loki will be at the centre of it all.

Loki is brought back up to the harem, where maidservants await to prepare him for the festivities. They bathe him (in cold water, mind), rub sweet oils in his skin and hair, dress him in fine silks. His hair is plaited according to the dance mistress' exacting specifications, and kohl is applied around his eyes.

Although he hadn't touched the slop he'd been fed in the Underground, Loki can't seem to bring himself to eat. His nerves are utterly frayed, and he still hasn't made up his mind about his big idea.

"Sorry," He murmurs to the girl applying henna to his forearm. He's shaking, and he'd smudged her design.

He forces down a bit of bread, cheese and fruit. Norns, he's more nervous about this than when he was first sent to dance for Odin in the first place.

At length, Loki is changed into his first costume - the one for their opening number - and is brought down to the antechamber where the performers are assembling. It's twistedly comforting to see that his fellow chorus girls fare no better than he. They twitter backstage and mime out the dance movements, shaking out their sweaty palms. One girl throws up onto a potted plant. Their dance mistress paces nearby, hissing at everyone to keep quiet, and thwacking those who do not comply. Her hair has been pulled back in a bun so tight her wrinkles look like they've been smoothed out.

Everything is running a bit late, Loki learns through the grapevine. Thor's official coronation ceremony took a little longer than planned, and the coordinators scramble to adjust the schedule and herd everyone to their places. Loki can tell Thor's been anointed from the sudden roar of the crowd and deafening tolling of bells outside the palace. The very foundations of Asgard seem to shake. Even backstage, everyone breaks out into uproarious cheers:

Long live the King! Long live the King!

Amidst all the chaos, Loki is still. He lets out an exhale, and thinks briefly of Odin.

He's not sure how long he waits after that. Maybe an hour or two, maybe more, as the guests file from the great Temple to the Imperial throne room. The din grows louder outside the antechamber, until finally, the trumpets blast, heralding the new King's arrival.

Funnily enough, Loki remembers little of their opening dance. Everything is a blur of faces - so, so many faces, more than Loki could have ever imagined- of blazing gold and streaks of red, and of the hundred dancing doppelgangers surrounding him. He knows Thor must be up on the dais, seated on his Imperial throne, watching, but Loki's otherwise too preoccupied to pick him out. He's not even onstage long: because Loki needs time to quick-change into his solo outfit, he is only set to dance in the first half of the chorus' performance. Before he knows it, he's offstage again, blinking wildly and disoriented, and in desperate need of a drink of water. But there's hardly any time to even catch his breath. A coordinator grabs him and tugs him to where two attendants wait with his second costume.

"Damn," Loki pants, wiping the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hennaed wrist. Even *seeing* his solo outfit makes his stomach churn. One attendant unlaces the back of his chorus costume, while the other prepares to throw the solo outfit over his head. He has less than seven minutes before his music is set to start, and although he's half naked amongst throngs of other people, right now, he can't be bothered with modesty. There are a lot of laces up the back, and if he's not properly secured, there is a chance that something could...malfunction.

“Quickly, quickly,” he hisses, even though he does not intend to be sharp to his attendants. He’s antsy, even exhilarated, and he wants to get on with it as soon as possible. His first attendant moves to undo all his intricate plaits in his hair, but Loki grows frustrated with her gentleness. He needs the braids out. Now.

“Just rip it out, rip it out, quickly.” Loki says frantically, finicking with his hair ties. He doesn’t care how hard she has to pull to get the ties free. He can already hear the music for the dance just before his; it’s time for him to get into position. “Is it coming?”

“Almost……almost…...yes,” The girl behind him says in a breathless huff. “Yes, you’re done, *go.”*

Loki shakes out his hair, trailing his fingers through it to fluff it up, then flips his head upside down. When he rights himself, he sees the dance mistress beetling towards him. Up close, her face does look rather taut, and Loki’s own scalp aches in sympathy.

“Come along, child."

She parts the throngs of people like a shark among a school of fish, Loki in tow. She sets him in place, quickly scanning to make sure the other four are there. He wonders if she’ll impart some last-minute wisdom to him before his big moment, but instead, she merely nods and scuttles off to hunt down whoever’s on next. Loki takes a deep breath and adjusts the bangles on his wrist. He’d managed to make it with less than a minute to spare.

Well, this is it. He thought he’d have decided by now whether he’d follow through on his big idea, but he finds he isn’t as troubled by his indecision as he should be. He supposes he’ll simply have to wait and see what happens when the time comes.

Loki calms then, as though all the noise has been muted, and all the mayhem has fallen away. He feels hyperfocused, like his wits and his reflexes have been sharpened on a whetstone. Loki knows, deep in his bones, that he can do this. He was *meant* to do this. This moment is his as much as it is Thor’s. If it is indeed his fate to die upon the rack as a traitor, let it also be remembered that Loki was once the most beautiful, most graceful, most desired creature in all of Asgard.

“Are you ready?” a dancer whispers to him, adjusting her feather-fans. Loki startles out of his reverie and looks at her.

“Ready,” he hears himself say, and it isn’t a lie. He was born for this moment.

***

Upon the Imperial Throne of Asgard, Thor sits, perking up in interest as four elegant dancers with feather-fans prance onto the stage. The music changes, becoming softer, sweeter. In a tight cluster formation, the dancers flutter their fans, swan-like, and peek their lovely faces out. Here and there, they break away to perform some flourish, but they return always to their central cluster, forming a barrier with their fans. The music pauses dramatically, and the four fall away, revealing a hidden fifth dancer, who strikes a pose at the centre of the floor.

Of course, it has to be Loki.

The Aurora tints blue and Loki begins, softly at first, hardly moving, and yet so commanding of his audience’s attention that the entire throne room goes still. So beautiful, so effortless. Loki leaps and spins, tumbles and turns, light-footed, sprightly and full of energy. *Joyful.* It’s a dance perfectly suited to the coronation of a new king.

And at the same time, however, there’s an air of sensuality and exoticism that has Thor leaning forward in his chair and gripping his armrests. Loki’s hair is completely loose - unheard of in traditional Asgardian dance. He whips it over his shoulders as he flings himself to the floor, then again, as he launches himself of the ground and onto his feet. Thor has never seen anything like it. It makes him dizzy to watch.

At one point, Loki stills - a dramatic pause - tossing his hair aside to reveal a coquettish smile. Thor swears he’s looking *right at him,* that ballsy little thing, and the effect is….striking, to say the least. But the moment quickly passes, and Loki is off again, running in the opposite direction. The music builds to a crescendo, and the Aurora goes from blue to an orangy-yellow. Loki enters into a spin, whipping his hair with every turn. He finishes with a high kick and flips over his front, pausing a beat to swivel his hips, just to toy with his ensnared crowd. He sprints, then completes an impressive tumbling pass. The audience gasps when Loki lands it perfectly.

Faster and faster, he goes - a blur of black hair and white silk. From the way the music is building, Thor can tell Loki’s dance is coming to an end, and all Thor can do is keep his eyes fixed on the spectacle before him. Loki does loves to finish with a bang, and Thor is so enthralled that he refuses to even blink lest he miss a single moment of it.

Thor needn’t have worried. Loki’s grand finale, as it so happens, is quite impossible to miss. At the final boom of the music, Loki crashes to the ground, and disappears before Thor’s very eyes in an

brilliant explosion of light and fireworks.

Loki is gone.

Chapter End Notes

but when will she get to the sex???? - everyone

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

> I've had some people ask me what Loki's dance style is like. If I had to describe it, I'd probably call it a cross between contemporary/modern dance and crazy iraqi hair dancing. I would LOVE loki to pull that shit out, my god. You just know Thor would be like *_*
>
> Special thanks to Maryandmathew for the translation!! that is the coolest thing ever!!!
>
> Hope you like! xox

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A single collective intake of breath is heard throughout, as if the throneroom itself had taken a massive gasp. Thor, too, all but bolts upright in his throne, startled and blinking away the spots in front of his eyes. The smoke clears, but he hadn't been mistaken - Loki has disappeared before his very eyes.

After a shocked silence comes uproarious applause and cheers. The crowd goes mad for Loki, the wall of sound almost as deafening as when Thor had made his grand entrance earlier that evening. Thor sits back, trying to look as kingly and unaffected as possible.

"Where is he? Where is he?" Thor hisses surreptitiously to his steward. "Where did he go?"

Heurig stammers, looking around frantically for some answer to appease his lord. Everyone's face is as stupefied as his own. "Majesty, I -"

All around them is chaos. The conductor at the head of the orchestra struggles to get his musicians' attention. He flails his baton emphatically, indicating for them to proceed with the next piece of music. Meanwhile, off in the distance, Thor picks out the head planner, who appears to be yelling at one of his assistants. The next batch of dancers are herded onstage, their painted faces barely masking their shock and confusion.

This is his coronation, damn it, shouldn't everything be perfectly in order? Hasn't everything been planned to the minutest detail? And here they all are, scrambling about like chickens with their heads lopped off!

"*Find him,*" Thor demands. "You find him right now, or by the Gods- "

Their exchange is interrupted by a meek tug to Heurig's sleeve. Heurig receives some message and nods with relief. He turns back to Thor.

"He's here, Majesty. He's backstage. He's been apprehended."

At that, Thor calms a bit and relaxes into his throne. Loki hadn't disappeared into the ether. He's here. He's still here.

His temper thus mollified, Thor allows himself to see some amusement in the situation.

Parlour tricks, indeed!

Before he even knows it, Thor is laughing: a deep, insuppressible husky sound bubbling up from inside his chest. Thor laughs until his face hurts and his side cramps. He thinks Heurig looks at him oddly, and that only makes him laugh harder. But he can't help himself. Of all the spectacles he'd seen this night, the many marvelous sights and sounds, that had certainly been the most *entertaining.*

"*Bravo,*" He murmurs under his breath, clapping slowly in delight. "Oh, Bravo."

***

The feasting begins shortly thereafter. A great banquet is prepared with hundreds of delicacies imported from all the ends of the Realms. More music, more dancing, countless toasts to Thor's name. His people have been as eager for him to assume power as Thor himself. It's not as though Thor is untested; Thor has been acting as active regent for nearly ten years, and has already proved himself to be more than capable as a warrior and politician. Odin had gone into such deep mourning after the death of his wife that he all but became a recluse, and Thor has been the public face of the monarchy ever since. The people are fickle in their love. Even if Odin wakes again, he will never be the beloved figure he once was.

Thor laughs again and adjusts the crown of cherry blossoms in his hair. He takes another drink as his friends at the head table raise their glasses to him. There will be dancing and feasting until the stroke of midnight, at which time a fireworks display is scheduled to take place above the palace

(*planned,* this time). And after that, when the masses of guests have retired to their chambers, Thor will retreat with his closest friends to the afterparty, where Loki will be waiting for him.

Thor shakes his head, half-laughing at the audacity of his little slave. Using his magic so openly? So brazenly? When not twenty-four hours before, Thor had sentenced him to a night Underground.

If he was looking for Thor's attention, he's certainly got it.

***

It's almost one-thirty in the morning when Thor staggers up to the afterparty, still thrumming with glee and excitement after the night's events. His friends and intimates cheer boisterously at his arrival. The courtly dignity and decorum they'd exhibited during the coronation ceremony has crumbled completely; aided, in large part, to copious amounts of wine and mead. Like Thor, most have changed out of their ceremonial robes into more comfortable fare. Some already even have courtesans perched upon their laps.

"Long live the King," they chant, and Thor laughs, lifting his arm in greeting. While he'd enjoyed every moment of his coronation, he'd definitely been looking forward to this the most. However, waiting for him on his divan is not Loki, as Thor had requested, but two dark-haired female slaves.

Thor stops in his tracks. "Where is my dancer? Where is Loki?"

Heurig's eyebrows shoot up. He purses his lips briefly before answering. "Why, he's been arrested, My King."

Thor's face immediately curls into a terrifying snarl, and Heurig cowers.

"What? Why?"

"For disrupting your coronation and magic-related offenses, My King. We did not want to interrupt your Majesty over such a trivial matter, so we thought -"

"You thought wrong. Loki is *my* slave, and if I wish to arrest him I will give the order myself.

Now, I specifically ordered him to be present here tonight, so if you wish to retain your position in my court, I suggest you bring him to me immediately."

Heurig bows and makes haste to rectify the situation.

Still fuming, Thor shoos away the girls, takes his place upon the cushions, and demands another drink of wine. Sometimes it feels as though he's surrounded by imbeciles.

"What's that about?" Volstagg says from his nearby couch. "They were twins!"

"I sent for Loki tonight."

Volstagg harumphs, his mouth full of some kind of chocolate cake.

"Well, when he gets here, make sure you tell that little show-stopper his stunt damn well nearly made me shit my pants."

***

Thor hasn't long to wait. In short order, Loki is hauled in with two Einherjar at his back, his slight wrists bound with magic-inhibiting manacles. Loki's costume is rumpled and his hair is dishevelled, and his eyes are wide and terrified. He looks much as he did the day before, when Thor had passed judgement on him. But this time, there's no fury in Thor's heart - not towards Loki, anyways.

"I'm sorry," Loki whispers. He holds his arms out imploringly. "I'm sorry, my King, I'm sorry, I'm - Ahh!"

He's cut off as Thor rises from his seat and grips him under the arms. In one smooth motion, Thor picks him up and holds him aloft, laughing in delight. Loki makes a sharp yelp in surprise, his manacled hands scrambling for purchase on Thor's shoulders. He's light, much more so than Thor had expected. Thor holds him there for a moment, high over his head so that everyone present can bear witness, then carefully sets him back on his feet. He takes Loki's face in his hands and chuckles at the bewildered expression there.

“You’re mad, do you know that? Hmmm? What in Bor’s name made you think that was a good idea?” Thor says, utterly unable to hide the fondness in his voice. He smooths his thumbs over Loki’s cheeks. “Never in my life have I ever met a creature as foolhardy and as reckless as you.”

Loki’s shoulders sag, and he exhales shakily, the fear and tension seeping from his frame. He flushes, lovely pink spots high on his cheeks. And although his mouth is open, he says nothing - that cunning tongue of his seemingly rendered speechless, for once.

Thor tucks Loki to his side, turning to the guards who had escorted him. “By whose order was he arrested?”

They look briefly at each other, neither one wanting to give the king a response.

“Apologies, most high King,” one begins, “The order came from Captain Rekstag.”

Rekstag. He oversteps his bounds. Thor will have to tighten the reins in his command, so that no one will doubt just who is in charge around here.

“Loki is a member of my household, and I his lord and master. Any wrongdoing on his part is to be brought to me first, and no one is to lay a hand on him without my say-so. Do I make myself clear?”

The guards nod solemnly. “Yes, Imperial Highness.”

Thor motions to Loki. “Now, unbind him.”

One guard steps forward with the key, and Loki holds out his manacled hands obligingly. The look on his face is somewhere between relieved, stunned, and almost…. *smug,* to the point where Thor wouldn’t have been surprised if Loki stuck his tongue out at them. That same self-satisfied little smirk that had so irked Thor when Loki belonged to Odin now only tugs Thor to fondness. There is a certain amount of gumption and pluck to pulling a stunt like that. Thor is big enough to admit that his little slave has courage. Impulsive, reckless courage, perhaps, but courage nonetheless.

The guards murmur their apologies, bow hastily, and back out. Thor turns his attention back to Loki, who is rubbing at the tender skin of his wrists. Loki ducks his head, although Thor sees the ghost of a smile tugging at his lips.

“It was not my intention to upset the proceedings so.”

Thor’s face cracks into a wide, playful grin. “No? No ulterior motive, to surpass all the others, to make all my guests gape in wonder at your loveliness?” Thor pulls Loki close, rumbling into his ear. “Outshine me at my own coronation…”

“With all due respect, My King,” Loki says, looking up shyly through his eyelashes, “That would be quite impossible.”

Thor narrows his eyes at the rather shameless bit of flattery, but in truth it’s no worse than anything else he’s heard this day. Thor grins, and decides to let himself be charmed.

“Come,” he says, tugging on Loki’s hand. “The night is yet young, and you must be in dire need of a drink.”

***

Settled on his daybed, his friends surrounding, the object of his (somewhat considerable) obsession at his side, Thor is hard-pressed to imagine a moment more perfect than this. He is King tonight, finally. His future stretches before him, replete with limitless potential - of battles to be won, adventures to be had, lovers to take to his bed. There is nothing he cannot accomplish. Thor will carve a legacy for himself that will dwarf whatever his father had created. And it all begins tonight.

“Here,” Thor says jovially, handing Loki a small glass of amber-colored liqueur. Loki takes it, sniffing thoughtfully, then sips daintily over the edge in a manner more suited to a prim court lady.

“Not like that!” Thor laughs. “Haven’t you ever had a proper drink before? All in one go. I’ll do it with you. On the count of three. One….two…..three!”

Thor downs his own shot, savouring the burn, the faint taste of licorice chasing down his throat. He smashes the empty glass on the floor in delight.

“Another!” he calls.

Loki, meanwhile, is coughing like he'd just swallowed a mouthful of sand. He'd finished his shot like a good boy, but his face is red, and he hacks away to sooth the itch in his throat. Thor chuckles, patting him on the back.

"Good?" Thor cannot help but grin. "Now smash your glass."

"Water please," Loki croaks, wiping his mouth with the back of his wrist and setting the emptied glass on the tray by his side.

"And another one for him as well," Thor orders the nearby serving boy, who dutifully pours two more helpings. "You're going to have to learn."

Loki merely coughs in response. His cheeks and nose are such a sweet shade of pink - either from the coughing or the alcohol.

Loki steels himself and swallows down his second helping with no complaint. He coughs less this time, and smashes his glass upon the floor, just as Thor had done.

"There you go," Thor beams.

"Another," Loki says, his voice hoarse. Thor lifts his eyebrows, equal parts pleased and surprised.

"Oh ho ho!" Volstagg cheers from his nearby couch. "He's handling it better than Fandral!"

Fandral simply huffs into his martini, muttering something about Volstagg's beer-gut under his breath.

Thor squeezes Loki to his side, stroking the runt's cheek with the back of his knuckle. "I'm beginning to think I have a little troublemaker on my hands." Thor bellows to his attending servant, "Are you deaf, boy? He said he wants another!"

The servant scrambles to obey, and pours Loki and Thor two more shots.

“Aiwa!” Thor downs his shot. Loki finishes his as well with only a slight throat-clearing. Pleased, Thor tugs Loki closer with the arm that’s slung over his shoulders.

“How is it?” Thor asks, deciding he rather likes the telltale flush to Loki’s cheeks.

“Strong,” Loki answers, and smiles self-consciously. “Forgive me, I am unused to the effects of alcohol. Odin thought it unbecoming for me to drink.” Loki turns to Thor, wide eyed, as if suddenly realizing his mistake. “I mean, His Majesty the Allfather.”

“Well, I am your master now,” Thor declares, quickly brushing off the reference to his father. His voice becomes low and husky, “And I, for one, have no interest in having you continue to play the innocent virgin….”

“Oi, you two,” Volstagg calls from his sofa. “Take the poor boy upstairs if you’re going to talk like that.”

Thor just laughs. “I am King now, and I will do as I like!”

“Norns, I don’t know how I will abide the next few millennia if you’re going to rub *that* in my face every waking moment.” Volstagg moans. Then, as if struck by some grand idea, Volstagg points to two slave boys grinding against each other lewdly. High-class prostitutes, the lot of them, whom Thor had brought in for his guests to enjoy at their leisure.

“Why not have him give you a proper show?” Volstagg gestures at Loki. “Go ahead, little one! Go dance a bit for us. You’ll put them to shame!”

Loki looks uneasy at the suggestion. He glances to Thor with furrowed brows. Thor’s cock stirs at the thought of Loki dancing so provocatively - indeed, he makes a mental note to have Loki perform for him in more intimate circumstances - but when he does, it certainly won’t be for *Volstagg’s* benefit. A sight like that is meant for Thor’s eyes alone.

“He’s not a common whore,” Thor snaps, tightening his arm around Loki’s neck. “Do not mistake him for such.”

Volstagg's bushy eyebrows shoot up into his hairline. "I didn't mean it like that, Thor. I was merely suggesting -"

"Set your eyes on any other," Thor growls. He leaves no room for misinterpretation: Loki is *his.*

Volstagg brushes Thor's moodswing off easily with a loose, good-natured shrug, being used to Thor's mercurial temperment.

"Fair enough." Volstagg hauls himself off the couch and scratches his protruding stomach. "Well then. I might as well partake. I've been ogling that one all night." He gestures to a buxom redhead. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll be but a moment -"

"A *moment* indeed," Fandral sniggers, causing the four of them to break out into raucous laughter. Volstagg squares his shoulders.

"My cock is so massive that I only need but a moment to bring my lovers to the heights of ecstasy," he grabs his crotch in emphasis, "*Fandral."*

In short order, Thor's friends excuse themselves, selecting amongst the proffered beauties to take to their beds. In a bit of ostentatious one-upmanship, Fandral retires with two slaves under his arms, one male, one female, a look on his face that *dares* anyone else to comment his manhood. Volstagg returns, his face stained with lipstick ("Among other places," he winks), but soon collapses into a deep, drunken, blissful sleep on a nearby couch. Hogun, being the most temperate of the bunch, retires alone - he has never been one to indulge in pleasures of the flesh.

"And you, my lady Sif?" Thor asks, turning to his last remaining friend. "Will you take a lover tonight?"

"I might be tempted," Sif says airly, cocking her head, a playful smile tugging her lips. She gestures to a pretty young man with shaggy brown hair. "If Fandral does not hog them all to himself."

"A slave could not be more lucky than to be given the opportunity to please you," Thor says earnestly. And he means it - of all his friends, Sif is the oldest and perhaps the closest. Smart, strong, and beautiful, Thor once thought, long ago, that perhaps she would make him a good wife. She was the first and only person he'd ever kissed on the lips; coincidentally, she was also the only person to have ever punched him in the face. They had both been young - barely in their teenage

years - but it was enough to put an end to Thor's boyish crush.

"You say that because you've never been burdened with the task! I am notoriously difficult to please." She looks back towards the slave, eyes narrowing with interest. "His tongue better be good."

Thor laughs. "Gods help him."

Sif waggles her eyebrows, and bids Thor goodnight with a kiss to his cheek. "Congratulations, my friend."

"Goodnight," Thor says, grinning back at her. She pats his shoulder and takes her leave. Thor watches her go, the brunet slave's hand in hers. Loki too is paying attention. He must know that soon Thor too will want to retire.

"Wine, Loki?" Thor asks, gesturing to Loki's empty glass.

Loki looks down from where he'd watched Sif exit, as though he'd forgotten he was still clutching his empty glass. He shrugs loosely with a small, tense laugh, "Any more and I might fall asleep in your Majesty's lap."

Thor grins, not hating that idea, although it would not suit his purposes tonight.

"Something else, then," Thor says, motioning at a servant, who brings him his pipe and lights it.

Taking it in hand, Thor takes a deep inhale, cheeks hollowing as he puffs on his pipe. Holding his breath a beat, Thor slowly exhales the tangy smoke. He cracks his eyes open a slit and notices Loki eyeing him warily.

"Do you know what this is?" he asks.

"I thought….such things were illegal in Asgard." Loki answers slowly.

Thor laughs. “For the common masses, maybe. Not for a King.” He takes another puff and lets his head loll back, humming all the while.

“A king who breaks his own law?” Loki says, but his voice is light and teasing, so Thor chooses not to take offense.

“I *am* the law now,” Thor corrects. “Here,” Thor offers his pipe. “It’ll help you relax.”

Loki waves his hand in a gentle, if somewhat sloppy *no thanks.* “I am plenty relaxed already.”

“Just one hit,” Thor encourages, and holds the pipe to Loki’s lips before he can utter another refusal. Obediently, Loki takes a long, drawn-out drag. He holds his breath a beat and exhales out the smoke. His eyelashes flutter closed as he does so, effortless as always in his sensuality.

Loki hums, “I could get used to this.”

“This?”

“Being the favourite of the king.” Loki clarifies, and takes another puff of Thor’s pipe without asking.

.“Favourite?” Thor feigns bewilderment, although deep down he’s amused. “This is news to me.”

“Well, I am, aren’t I?” Loki goes on, exhaling the smoke through sinful lips. “I am the one you’ve chosen to be with you tonight.”

And despite how much Thor would argue the contrary, Loki is evidently right. He *is* Thor’s favourite - for the time being, at least. And being a favourite comes with certain perks, does it not?

“Seeing as you’ve clearly decided….” Thor waves a servant forward, who presents Loki with a small velvet box. Loki flicks his eyes to Thor.

“Go on, open it,” Thor says, gesturing broadly, and laughs at Loki’s wary, suspicious face. “I

promise no surprises this time."

Loki takes the box in hand and opens it slowly.

"Oh," Loki whispers, recoiling slightly. His face is pure shock, and Thor delights in it.

Thor smiles lazily. "Moonstones. From Alfheim."

"My lord, I -"

"What?" Thor teases, greatly enjoying Loki's stupefied face. "Does it not please you?"

"Surely this is too extravagant a gift for as lowly a slave as I…"

Ha! As if Loki considers himself a *lowly slave,* the way he peacocks about, the haughty creature! He's fishing for compliments, Thor can tell.

Thor smiles slyly, "Ah, but my father lavished you with jewels."

"Not quite like this," Loki says, still staring in awe at his new necklace, which makes Thor puff his chest up a bit. Less than nine hours crowned and he's already one-upping his father.

"Can not a master reward his slave for his dedication and efforts? I think you'll find I am more than generous to those who serve me well. And besides," Thor pulls Loki closer, whispering into his ear, "You are my *favourite,* after all…."

Thor reaches for the necklace, and Loki sweeps his hair to one side to allows Thor to snap the clasp in place. Thor's fingers trail along the sensitive nape of Loki's neck for the briefest moment, and Thor is once again struck by how soft and cool Loki's skin is. The jewel hardly compares to Loki's loveliness, but Thor decides he likes the way Loki looks when he is so resplendently arrayed.

"It's beautiful," Loki says, toying with the pendant with his thumb and forefinger. "Thank you." And then, Loki surprises Thor once more: by surging forward and placing a sweet, chaste kiss on

Thor's cheek. It's only the ghost of a kiss, really; Thor barely even registers it before it's over. The gesture catches Thor off guard. Loki is smiling at him, his eyes wide and crystalline, glinting almost eerily bright in the dim light.

And suddenly, Thor aches, deep in his chest - a sudden, wrenching sensation that hits him out of nowhere. Thor doesn't know why it should matter, but in this moment he desperately wants to know what Loki is thinking. *Really* thinking. If deep down he resents Thor and simply tells him what he thinks Thor would like to hear. If he's manipulating Thor for his own ends, as so many others have done before. Thor is not so naive as to believe that Loki's sweetness goes to the marrow. Beneath all the servile simpering there is the real Loki: willful, sharp-witted, vain, proud, *audacious*. Not the characteristics of a born and bred slave, even one as overindulged as Loki. And as much as Thor clings to the familiarity ofl propriety, where he knows he'll be addressed with the reverence befitting his rank, he finds himself curious to learn more about the *real* Loki - the one who thought it would be a good idea to use his magic after having been imprisoned for it the night before, by Bor's beard!

Then again, if Thor allowed Loki to speak freely, would he even like what Loki had to say?

Even his closest friends are plied with estates and titles. The only person Thor knew for certain loved him has been dead and gone these ten long years.

Perhaps it's the hashish that's making him so soft. Ordinarily, Thor stifles these thoughts and takes his pleasure where he may. He's King tonight - in name and in deed, at last. Whether or not Loki means what he says….does it really matter?

And so, Thor pushes Loki down gently to lie on his back so that his legs are settled in Thor's lap. Loki goes, although his eyes dart about nervously. Evidently, the wine and the smoke hasn't completely taken the edge off his nerves.

"Shall we retire, My lord?" Loki says.

Thor is stuffed full, loose from the wine and the herbs he'd smoked, and still buzzing with residual excitement from the festivities. He's also feeling rather indolent, and not really in the mood to trudge all the way to his new suite just to suit a pleasure slave's whims.

"My king," Loki's voice oozes seduction, "The hour is late. Let us retire to your chambers."

“Mmm,” Thor says by way of response, although he’s rather distracted: Loki looks so lovely splayed out like this in his pretty costume, his pretty necklace. Thor reaches up and undoes the ties for the curtains surrounding the daybed, so at least they are afforded some privacy. The fabric is heavy, but not so much that it completely blocks out the light from outside. He tugs the curtains closed with finality.

Loki props himself up on his elbows.

“You mean to….here?” He suddenly seems so small, lacking the confidence he’d shown mere moments before.

In a single, predatory movement, Thor curls over, covering Loki’s body with his. He murmurs darkly in Loki’s ear, “No more refusals; no more games. I have waited long enough for you. Be good and lie back.”

With a gentle hand to Loki’s breast Thor pushes him firmly down, and Loki relents, settling on the cushions with a nervous swallow. His chest heaves under Thor’s palm, his heartbeat beginning to race. Thor muscles Loki’s long legs open and kneels between them, taking a moment to admire the latest addition to his harem, spread out for him like a banquet to be devoured. Even though it nearly drove him mad with want, Thor is glad he waited. How very fitting that he should despoil his father’s prized possession on the very night when he ascends to the throne!

Thor trails his hand from Loki’s neck, down his breastbone and to his navel, still half-covered in his bunched-up dance costume. It’s more intricate up close, with red detailing along the hem and Thor’s crest embroidered over Loki’s heart. Although it’s somewhat rumpled now, it must’ve been a lovely garment when Loki had first been laced into it.

“I liked your dance,” Thor says thoughtfully, admiring the way his hands span the entire breadth of Loki’s lean waist. “I thought you were….” his voice trails off, “Magnificent.”

“It pleases me to hear you say so,” Loki replies. His voice hitches a bit when Thor thumbs over his nipples over the silk. He’s so skittish, even with all the drink Thor had plied him with, but this too pleases Thor. Thor likes innocent virgins, just as Thor likes refined courtesans and wanton, shameless whores. Youthful naivete is only an asset for so long. In time, Thor will teach Loki how to pleasure him best.

“You aren’t going to disappear on me now, are you?”

Loki shakes his head no, a shy smile tugging his lips.

“An impressive trick to be sure,” Thor says, “How reckless you are, little one.”

“You said you wanted something they’ve never seen before."

“That I did,” Thor says, toying with Loki’s nipples and thumbing over the nubs until they harden under the fine silk. Loki lets out an involuntary shiver, squeezing his eyes closed for a moment.

He’s wonderfully sensitive, Thor thinks. He responded so well to Thor’s touch before, when Thor had gifted him with the golden beads. It pleases Thor to know that Loki will be an engaging bedmate once he’s been fully introduced to the arts of love. Although Thor knows he’s a selfish man, he does prefer it when his bedmates are as amorous as he, and when his passion is willingly reciprocated. At this point, however, Loki’s unwillingness would not have been enough to stop Thor.

“I’ve thought about this for a very long time,” Thor confesses, taking a slim ankle in hand, and marvelling at its delicacy. He kisses the skin there with unabashed reverence and hums at Loki’s sweet scent. He must be truly drunk, because then he laughs, adding, “This and little else.”

Wanting to move forward with the proceedings, Thor reaches up under Loki’s hemline and hooks his fingers under the waistline of his underthings. Loki flinches, fingers scrambling at Thor’s questing hands.

“What?” Thor says.

“They’ll hear us…” Loki says, his eyes flickering to the curtain.

Thor snorts. Everyone is so drunk he’s sure they wouldn’t hear Ragnarok coming. They’ll not be bothered when the curtain is drawn like this. His servants know him better than that. And besides, it’s not Loki’s place to question him on such things.

“Then you’d best be quiet,” Thor says, and pulls Loki’s underthings past his hips and down his long legs, until at last, Loki is exposed to him.

To say that Thor had been curious to see what Loki is sporting between his legs would be a bit of an understatement. While Thor has had lovers both male and female, he's never had one that is a mix of the two, as Loki is. But Thor has a certain fondness for novelty, and he's eager to explore the pleasures that Loki's dual sexes afford. Thor had had a bit of a struggle imagining what a dual sexed creature would look like, and his cock drools in anticipation at what he might find. As promised, Loki is indeed hairless, both along his vaginal lips and at the juncture of his legs. His cunt is plump and fleshy-pink, delicious as a peach. Loki's cock peeks out from in between the folds, ready to be teased and played with. Overall, he appears more….female than Thor had expected.

"You don't look -" Thor begins, more confused than anything. He's not disappointed by any stretch of the imagination, but he had pictured something more... *in between,* perhaps?

Loki is blushing red to his hairline. "I just - um - I need to be….." Loki seems to brace himself. His voice is barely above a whisper "....aroused."

Thor looks back down at Loki's tempting little cunny, soft and pink and immaculate. Thor is definitely hard in his silk pants, already craving to climb atop Loki and fuck him like he's always wanted. But the other half of him - the more cerebral part - wants to explore Loki's body and see what his intersexuality has to offer.

"I see," Thor grins, eyes glinting with the prospect of a challenge. He licks his fingers obscenely, "You don't find me arousing, pet?"

Loki's mouth opens and Thor can tell he's trying to come up with a delicate response. Thor laughs. Not so sharp-witted when he's intoxicated!

"Well that is something we shall have to remedy, won't we."

At that, he sinks his fingers into the flowery folds, delicately teasing at the flesh and thumbing carefully at Loki's cock. Loki makes a small mewling noise, his eyes squeezed shut, but he does not flinch away from Thor's touch. He seems to have resigned himself to the fact that Thor means to bed him here.

"Relax," Thor hushes, trying desperately to ignore his own hard cock. "If you're going to take me, sweetheart, you'll have to be nice and wet."

Thor continues his ministrations, getting ever bolder as Loki begins to rock his hips, seeking more stimulation. It's all the encouragement Thor needs to finally sink his fingers into Loki's giving little cunt, curling his fingers upwards in the way he knows women like. Loki gasps aloud at this, and a fresh sluice of wetness slickens Thor's fingers. By now, Loki's cock is somewhat hardened and pink. It hardens, growing firmer with every pass of Thor's fingers, although it is nowhere near Thor's own length and girth.

When Thor catches his eye, Loki blushes, hiding his face behind his hands.

Thor chuckles, prying Loki's hands away. "No need to be shy about it, my sweet. It just means you'll enjoy our coupling." His voice goes low, "Which is very fortunate for you. You'll find I have an insatiable appetite."

Thor tries stroking Loki's cock with his other hand and Loki bucks, seemingly torn between thrusting into Thor's palm and down onto Thor's fingers. Loki murmurs something soft and breathy that Thor, in a haze of lust, doesn't quite catch.

"Just do it," Loki repeats, more firmly this time, but his voice hitches as Thor rubs at him more insistently. "Do it, please."

"Yeah?" Thor grins, his cock twitching with eagerness. "You want it, sweet thing?"

Loki nods vehemently. The determined glint is back in his eyes.

At that, Thor's self control snaps completely. If the runt wants it, than Thor will fuck him until he screams and begs for Thor to stop. Thor pulls his fingers out and hastily undoes the ties to his silk drawstring pants, fumbling at the knot and growling with impatience. There's precum smeared on his stomach and upper thighs; he wants this so bad he can't think straight.

Thor grabs Loki by hooking his arms under Loki's knees and tugs him forwards, positioning him just the way Thor wants: flat on his back, legs open and inviting. He gives himself a few cursory strokes, grunting at his own touch. Loki, meanwhile, is wide-eyed at the sight of him, and probably more than a little intimidated.

"Spread yourself," Thor orders, his voice a husky rumble. Loki obeys and parts his lips with his fingers, giving Thor a clear view of the pink inner folds, his virginal entrance. In a single motion Thor presses forward, impaling Loki on his cock.

Loki lets out a started yelp, then quickly presses a hand over his own mouth to stifle his cries. He squeezes his eyes closed.

"By the gods, " Thor curses, sinking into Loki until he's completely sheathed. Loki feels...deeper than any of the lovers Thor's had before. Being rather gratuitously endowed, Thor's never really been able to fit all the way inside his bedmates. But Loki is neither an Asgardian maid, nor a elven concubine. He's a runt, a Jotunn runt. Maybe he's built differently than the others, made to be mounted by those of greater size than he? The thought makes Thor shudder.

Thor thrusts in because he can't help it. Loki's cunt is warm and lush and tight around his cock, and he's already ansty to started fucking him in earnest. He slams Loki again hard before he can stop himself and groans into Loki's neck.

"Ah," Loki sobs, his face scrunched up in pain. There is wetness at his eyelashes.

In his haze of pleasure, Thor hadn't even registered Loki's sharp fingernails digging into his biceps, nor the way Loki's thighs are clenched around Thor's waist as if trying to dislodge him. But Thor is buried too deep, too heavy on top of Loki's slim frame, too forceful and overbearing in everything he does. He couldn't stop if he tried.

"Am I hurting you?" Thor blurts out instead. It's a ridiculous thing to say, and he knows it, for what is a slave's discomfort to a king?

Loki's expression melts into something soft and vulnerable as his watery gaze focuses in on Thor's face. His eyes are so bright in the darkness.

Loki shakes his head. "N-no, my king."

"Liar," Thor says, although his voice is almost fond. "It's alright. I will start slow. Hush." He pets Loki's hair and resumes moving, rocking in slower than before, pumping in and relishing Loki's soft humid gasps against his shoulder. Loki is being good, so Thor is willing to indulge him.

Thor senses Loki is beginning to open for his cock. The soft gasps of pain melt into ones that sound high-pitched, kittenish, sweet. Loki grip on Thor's biceps slackens, and now rather than pushing Thor away, Loki seems to be tugging him closer, both by his fingers tangled in Thor's hair and by the way his ankles have locked around Thor's thighs. He even begins to rock to meet

Thor's thrusts, eliciting a groan of pleasure from the newly-crowned king. *So good, Loki* , Thor thinks he hears himself say. *So good, my sweet slave. My favourite.*

Thor is so lost in the haze of lovemaking that he hardly even registers that he's being kissed. On the mouth.

Thor's hips stutter, and he breaks pace out of sheer surprise. Loki's lips are definitely upon his, his fingers tangled in Thor's hair to keep him in place. Thor has never really been kissed before. He's rather at a loss; Loki's lips are soft and insistent against his own, gently coaxing Thor to reciprocate. A swipe of tongue encourages Thor to open his mouth, and he does, moaning softly, sinking into the novel sensation against his better judgement. Loki tastes like wine and carnality, fresh and young and sensual.

Thor breaks away. As he should have in the first place.

"No, Loki," he whispers.

Loki huffs, laying his head back on the cushion. Loki's expression is dazed, almost wounded, like maybe Thor had been too sharp in his rejection. His eyes are glassy and pleading in the dim light, and his lips - his pretty, pink-bitten lips - are mouthing a single, breathy word:

Thor.

Had Thor heart it correctly? He isn't sure. His head is swimming, and not entirely from drink. No, it was definitely his name. Loki had said his name. His actual name. *Thor.* Thor! As if they were lovers.

"Do not call me that," Thor says, although he can't quite muster any real heat to his words. Thor pulls out, and immediately regrets the loss of the tight wet heat around his cock. "On your belly," He commands, more forcefully now, because he doesn't think he'd have the will to resist if Loki tries to kiss him again.

Impatient to resume their fucking, Thor uses a hand on Loki's hips to encourage him to move. "Come on, quickly."

Thor's face is firm, and after a brief hesitation Loki does as he's told, and rolls himself over so that

he’s lying on his stomach.

Thor’s lust is ignited anew at being presented Loki’s ass. It’s as lovely as Thor had imagined: firm, hairless, milky white, but still with a lingering fleshiness that comes with youth. Greedily, Thor hitches the hem of the costume up to expose Loki completely: the mounds of his ass, the cunt lips dripping between his legs, the tantalizing shadow of Loki’s furled hole. Growling, Thor grips the flesh of his ass possessively just to savor its meatiness. This is *his* now, to do with as he pleases. He gives Loki’s rump a solid *thwack* and Loki yelps in surprise.

“Lift your hips, there’s a love,” Thor rasps, positioning himself behind Loki. Loki obediently tilts his hips up in offering, arching his back, and Thor trails down a hand down his flank in reward. He rubs the mushroom head of his cock along the slit of Loki’s cunt, teasing them both, before slamming in and mounting Loki in one smooth thrust. Thor blinks back the stars in his eyes; he can’t imagine himself ever tiring of this sensation. He’d always loved to fuck, but had it always felt this good?

Loki cries out as he’s penetrated, but soon his voice peters off into nothing but broken whimpers since he’s half-smothered under Thor’s weight. His fists clutch at the cushions beneath him, his knuckles turning white; his shoulder blades flex at trying to keep himself from being crushed completely. Not wanting to suffocate him, Thor eases back, and props himself up with two sturdy arms beside Loki’s head.

Thor resumes moving, pistoning in and out of his pleasure slave, groaning every time he sheathes himself in Loki’s cunt. The new angle is making Loki squeak; Thor is beginning to get the impression that Loki’s inner frontal walls are quite sensitive, and Thor makes a point to rub him there with every inwards thrust.

“You like that? Hmm? Thor says, cocky, fucking in with lazy yet powerful thrusts. Loki’s hair is everywhere, masking his pretty face, which simply will not do. Thor grabs a silken fistful and tugs Loki’s head back, not ungently, but with enough force to bare Loki’s neck. “This is what you wanted, yes? To be fucked by the King of Asgard?”

Loki makes a mewling noise, his voice strangled.

“What was that?”

“Yes,” Loki cries out, “Yes!”

Thor groans, grinding into Loki as deep as he can go. He releases Loki's hair and instead wraps his fingers around Loki's throat possessively, although not so tight that it would render Loki unable to breathe.

"You're beautiful, you're so beautiful, you know that?" Thor pants into Loki's shoulder, like a goddamn dog in rut. "They all desired you. I bet that's what you wanted. For every man there to desire you as badly as I do."

Thor says this like it wasn't also his own desire for Loki to display himself so ostentatiously. Thor hadn't missed the looks Loki's dance had elicited, and the thought that Loki is his alone sends a frisson of pleasure down Thor's spine. Thor is a possessive man, even territorial - the product of being overindulged his entire life. Thor likes the best of everything, he likes being envied for it, and he doesn't like to share.

"I hated seeing you with him," Thor goes on hotly. "Every single time he touched you, it made me crazy. *You* make me crazy. You understand? I want you all to *myself.*"

Thor emphasizes his point with a harsh thrust that makes Loki rock forwards several inches with a choked cry.

"I am," Loki is saying, although the sound is muffled and punctuated with breathy gasps. "Yours."

"My slave," Thor agrees, groaning at the way Loki is rocks to meet Thor's thrusts. "My runtling slut."

Thor fucks in harder now, his previous gentleness degenerating into something harsher, more primal and animalistic. He feels his orgasm fast approaching, and he chases it with single-minded focus, all other thoughts melting away into oblivion. One day Thor will have Loki face-to-face so that he'll be able to watch him as he comes undone, but right now, Thor is too far gone to care about anything other than emptying into Loki's willing body.

And it comes when Thor slams into Loki one final time, balls deep - the tidal wave of sensation shooting up and down his spine, down to his toes and back again. Thor roars, gripping Loki with such brute strength he knows he'll leave bruises. He thrusts in a few more times to ride out his orgasm, coating Loki's insides thoroughly with come. Thor sees white spots in front of his eyes. He's not sure he's ever had a more satisfying orgasm.

Spent and panting, Thor pulls out and flops down at Loki's side, careful not to crush him after having given him such a thorough fucking. He tucks himself back in his pants as an afterthought and scratches lazily at his stomach. His mind is blissfully blank - the kind of peace that only comes after orgasm. Thor feels like something akin to melting butter, and he lets out a long, drawn out hum of pleasure. The wine and the smoke are taking its toll, and Thor's eyes droop, sleep encroaching into waking consciousness.

He hardly registers the warm body pressed up against his, but he unconsciously pulls the source of warmth closer, and succumbs to a deep, dreamless sleep.

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"You're ruined," is all Helblindi says about it, almost dispassionately, as if Loki's entire future had not just been completely uprooted in one fell stroke. The word pierces Loki to the core, sharper than any earthly blade. Ruined. There isn't really no way to come back after that, now is there?

"I'm not ruined. He didn't fuck me. I wouldn't have let him -"

Helblindi snarls, baring his sharp teeth. "You're as good as ruined when this gets out! What am I supposed to tell Laufey? What happens when he penetrates you and there's no blood? And after I tried so hard to get you into his bed, to provide for your future!"

"You make it sound like it's all I'm worth." Loki spits.

"No," Helblindi agrees. "You once had your dowry too. Now you are worthless." Helblindi sighs in frustrated exasperation. "All I asked was that you keep your purity. Just one simple request when Father died. You impudent, rash creature! Don't you understand what you have done? Your children could have been royalty."

Royalty. Ha. Loki is already royalty - nephew to Laufey-King himself. How was Loki supposed to know his uncle desired him? That Helblindi had long intended for Loki to warm Laufey's bed and birth pure-blooded royal children for the throne of Jotunheim?

“Then let me go with him, if Laufey won’t have me,” Loki says firmly, trying to counteract the panic rising in his chest. “It will be a good match. He’s of noble blood, a good lineage. He’ll still have me, I know it. He will take me - “

“Are you really that stupid?” Helblindi snarls viciously, making Loki startle. “That’s exactly what he wants! His clan’s ore mines run dry; their fortune will be gone within a generation. Bet he didn’t tell you that while you two were sneaking around behind my back, now did he? Can’t you see, he’s trying to recuperate their losses with the wealth your dowry will bring.” His face softens at Loki’s widening eyes, but his tone is just as mocking. “Oh, you really didn’t know that, did you? My poor, stupid brother, falling for his honeyed words; I thought you knew better than that. He popped you on purpose, ruined you on purpose, and he would have done far worse if I hadn’t arrived when I did. He thinks you’ll have no choice but to go to him now. But I’d sooner see you dead than surrender your dowry to him and his ilk.”

Loki is silent through all this, the unfamiliar feeling of betrayal sinking into his bones. The gravity of his situation hits him like a cannonball to the chest, punching the air out of his lungs. He can’t even bring himself to bristle at Helblindi’s barbed words. Helblindi is right, after all; Loki has no one to blame but himself. It had been his own idea to try and seduce Ulfr, in the hopes that eloping with him would finally free him of Helblindi’s guardianship. Why does he have to be so insolent and wilful? Why couldn’t have he been content to let Helblindi arrange his fate how he may? Why did he make promises to Ulfr he wasn’t even sure he’d be able to keep?

“What now?” Loki says quietly.

“You must leave. Immediately.”

“You’re sending me away?”

“Your continued presence at court would be an insult to Laufey,” Helblindi says, and Loki can practically hear the gears in his mind whirring. Helblindi strokes the lines on his chin, “A period of exile will let this scandal cool. In time….who knows what could happen?”

Helblindi’s voice trails off, but Loki has an idea of what his crafty brother has in mind. Although there’s no way Loki could secure himself a reputable consortship in his current state, there’s plenty of use for a runtling bedwarmer sporting heritage lines as regal as Loki’s.

Loki looks to the floor, resigned. “For how long?

Helblindi shrugs. "Until such a time when you can be of use again."

And that's really the crux of it: all his life, Loki's been only as good as his potential to further the family's interests. It is nothing to sacrifice one on behalf of the many. The Jotun race has no use for sentimentality.

"I never intended for this to happen," Loki says, trying to keep his voice from breaking.

Helblindi rests his giant hand on Loki's shoulder - not quite a gesture of comfort, but an approximation of one.

"I know, my brother," he says with a sigh. "I know."

***

Loki wakes in a daze, his head throbbing and mouth dry, feeling stiff, sore, and deathly tired. There's a soft rustling noise and sudden draft of cool, fresh air. In the dim light, Loki makes out the form of Thor's head steward - a bald, portly older man whom some say is a eunuch. He draws the curtain back and beckons at Loki once he sees that Loki is awake.

"Come along, child." he whispers.

"Why?" Loki croaks back, his voice almost unnaturally hoarse. He tries to sit up, but his head still swims with drink. He blinks several times to try and clear the spots in front of his eyes. *Damnit, Thor!*

"Because," The steward says, barely audible, "It's time for you to return to your chambers."

The memory of the previous night comes back to Loki in disjointed fragments - the dance, the arrest, the lovemaking. He can still feel Thor's dried spend between his thighs, and he feels sticky and sore on the *inside.* He must have only been asleep for a few hours, at the most. Past his curtains, the room is a mess of spilled food and drink, flower petals, broken plates. Someone even lost a wig. A few of Thor's guests still sleep in a drunken stupor on the couches, although most have long since retired to their own chambers. Silently, servants work to clear some of the debris.

They will be kept busy today too, and Loki does not envy them.

Beside him, Thor snores softly, one arm slung over his head, the other resting on his belly. Loki has enough of his wits about him to know that he *needs* to be there when Thor wakes. He wants to be the first thing Thor sees on his first day as king. *Whores* are sent away in the night once they've served their purpose. And Loki is no whore.

"I want to stay here," he manages to say.

"Trust me, you won't like his Majesty the morning after a night's revelry," the steward says, more irritably now. "Come along."

"No," Loki wrenches his arm from where the steward tries to grab him. "I want to stay here."

The steward sighs, as if he were dealing with an especially stubborn child. "You can't."

"You cannot make me." Loki hisses.

The steward purses his lips, then turns on his heels. Loki exhales in relief and sinks back into the pillow, letting his eyes droop.

He's not left alone for long. Without warning, Loki is grabbed and unceremoniously hauled out of bed. Loki thrashes, but it is of no use - his reflexes are sluggish, and when he squeals in surprise, he finds a firm hand pressed over his mouth. It's all he can do to try and cover himself with what's left of his costume as he's ripped out of bed. He's got nothing on underneath, as his underthings had been torn off by Thor in his haste. Hazily, Loki wonders why he bothers with modesty at all anymore.

They haul Loki out to the hallway, where the steward waits, his arms crossed in front of his chest. All that sudden jostling makes Loki want to throw up.

"Word of advice, child," The steward says, "Never forget what you are to him."

"How dare you lay your hands on me," Loki spits, his words alarmingly slurred. "By word of the

king, I am not to be touched. I am a member of his Majesty's household, and I will not be treated so….so...." Loki blinks several times and swallows down the urge to vomit. "...Shabbily."

The steward snorts, rolling his eyes. "His Majesty says a lot of things when his cock is hard." He gestures to the attendants restraining Loki, "He's drunk. Take him back to the harem, give him some water. Make sure he stays there."

***

Loki is deposited in his harem cell just as the sun is beginning to rise. He does not have the energy to struggle anymore; it would be futile to do so, and every movement exacerbates his nausea. He waits until they let him alone, too tired to even seethe at their rough handling. He fumbles impatiently at the laces up the back of his costume until his arms cramp. He wants the damn thing off. Now. From this angle, he can't see the knot of the laces, and moreover, his coordination is much diminished from the previous night's drink. Loki curses in frustration, tearing at the silk. In the end, he opts for cutting the laces with a small knife and ripping the fabric over his head. His once pretty, immaculate little costume is now ruined, and Loki doesn't care.

Naked now, Loki shivers, and forces himself to take a drink of the ice water that was left on his dresser. In the mirror, Loki catches a brief glimpse of himself: his hair a dishevelled mess, bags under his eyes, lingering kohl smeared at his eyelashes. No longer the pristine virgin Odin had once adored. Loki refuses to dwell on what Odin might say if he could see him now.

Loki's hand drifts to thumb at the moonstone pendant. He'd forgotten he'd even had it on, and he feels oddly….apathetic about it. Maybe he's just too tired. Loki unclasps it without really looking at it and tucks it safely in his jewelry box next to his dragonfly hairclip.

He has a feeling his headache will only get worse as he sobers up. He casts a clumsy pain-relief spell, but because his body is used to his own magic, the spell is less potent than it would've been had someone else cast it over him. He shouldn't have let Thor get him so inebriated. He should have insisted that Thor take him up to the Imperial Suite for their coupling. That way, he would still be laying in Thor's arms, undisturbed, and not alone in his harem cell with Thor's cum still flaky on the inside of his legs.

Stiffly, Loki lays down on his floor-bed, sniffling sofly. He's never felt so exhausted in his entire life. The last few weeks weigh heavily on him, and he succumbs to the stress, his small sniffles turning first into tears, then into a torrent of sobs. He doesn't even know why he's crying. Thor is more fond of him than ever; last night went off almost without a hitch. So what if Thor fucked him in public? Thor had enjoyed himself, that's all that matters. He'd been quick to jump to Loki's defense after his arrest - that has to be a good sign! Loki predicts he'll be riding high on Thor's favour for the next while, secure in the knowledge that he'll retain the king's interest at least until

he can obtain a more permanent position in the royal household. He'll be back in the Imperial Suite within the week, he knows it.

Loki curls in on himself and tugs his blanket over his shoulders. He's still too drunk, too sore, too light-headed from….whatever it was Thor made him smoke. He's not in his right mind. He'll sleep it off, and tomorrow everything will be better.

It has to be.

Chapter End Notes

For a lovely fanart inspired by this chapter, check out this peice by mindtheartspew!!!!
So awesome!!!!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> If you want to hear Loki's Jotun dance music as I picture it, click the link when you are prompted.
>
> Unbeta'd as ever, so any mistakes are my own.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Loki's first impression of Asgard is that it is green.

Upon leaving Vanaheim, the Allfather brings him to a quiet summer manor house in the Asgardian countryside, tucked away amongst lush forests and fertile fields. It is springtime and the trees are in bloom. Birds fritter in the canopy and crickets chip at night. The land is thrumming after having been asleep the whole winter long. So unlike the frosty tundra of his own homeland, where life struggles to thrive.

Loki spends his days indoors in the cool shade, his natural inclination to explore muted by his wariness of this foreign place and its pale-faced inhabitants. They watch him closely with narrowed, suspicious eyes. Loki does not venture far from Odin's side. He does not dare.

Loki's apprehension of his new master diminishes little, but he finds he does not hate the old man as much as he thought he would. Sure, Odin treats him as a lapdog. He likes to paw at Loki, certainly - there's hardly a time when he isn't stroking Loki's hair or belly or thighs - but the touch does not feel sexually charged the way that Ulfr's did. The fire in Odin's belly has been extinguished, and Loki is hardly one to complain. Better a lapdog than a whore. It's humiliating, but Loki endures.

Loki quickly learns to nuzzle back into his touch. This never fails to elicit a pleased rumble from the aging king.

"I cannot wait to bring you to court," Odin murmurs. "You will cause a sensation."

Loki smiles weakly and tries not to think about it.

As the weeks and months drag on, Loki's wariness quickly turns to boredom. Very little state documents are brought to Odin, and he only has but to sign them before they are secreted away back to the palace of Asgard. It seems like Helblindi had greatly overestimated Odin's involvement in governing the Realms; it is the Crown Prince who is the true king of Asgard. Loki wonders if he's wasting his time here, if this mission is as impossible as he'd first thought. Loki often lies awake at night, ruminating, his stomach in knots. What will become of him if he fails?

These thoughts dissipate by morning. Loki is, above all things, stubborn, and he refuses to abandon the task set before him. Odin must know where the Casket is hidden. It is he, after all, who had stole the Casket away in the first place. And Loki will wring his secrets from him if it's the last thing he does.

If their positions were reversed, Loki would not be so quick to trust a slave of an enemy race. It's almost laughable how much Odin clings to him, relying on him for his most basic needs: Loki helps Odin dress, eat, walk. He lays still while Odin sleeps and lets himself be petted when Odin seeks contact. In the evenings, Odin listens to minstrels play bittersweet songs on flutes and harps.The music is strange to Loki's ears but not unpleasant, and it usually has the blessed effect of putting Odin to sleep. The old man sighs deeply every once in awhile, but otherwise sits perfectly still, a melancholic air about him. Loki wonders if the music is reminding him of something - or someone.

If he's feeling festive, Odin has Loki dance for him. While this clearly pleases him best of all, it's a rare request for him to make. Perhaps he does not want the novelty of Loki's dancing to wear off too soon, or perhaps he is trying not to overexert Loki. Although Loki obliges, it always feels so odd to perform for just a single pair of eyes. Loki would much prefer an audience of a thousand to the Allfather's unwavering stare. They have no Jotun minstrels here, so Loki has to adapt his repertoire to suit Asgardian music. Often the steps don't seem to fit with the beat, making his movements feel odd and out of place, but Odin hardly seems to notice. Loki tailors his movements as best as he can, and after a few months, he becomes rather adept at it. This new style is wholly unique, wholly his own. A mix of both cultures.

When Odin's touch becomes insufferable, Loki slips away from underneath his sleeping form to find sanctuary in the bathchamber. Submerging himself in cold water helps to clear his head and cool his temper. Loki has always prefered to be alone, but these days he craves solitude more than ever. Sometimes he just needs a reprieve from constantly simpering at everything Odin does. He truly hates who he is when he's in Odin's presence.

It's times like these when Loki lets his mind wander. He hums thoughtfully to himself as he soaks his hair, letting his fingertips drift downwards to the place between his legs. He palms at himself there and lets mindless pleasure consume him. He can't help that he was born with a lusty appetite. As a youngling, Helblindi had been assigned to watch over him to make sure he didn't do something so stupid as peirce himself - not that Loki would have ever contemplated doing such a reckless thing. From a young age, he knew that if he didn't bleed on his first night, he'd be shamed forever.

But now, Loki supposes it doesn't matter. His questing fingers venture further still, to his cunt opening, teasing himself open with first one then two fingers. He likes the way this feels, although it's nowhere near the fullness he seeks. Dimly, Loki wonders what it would be like to have an affair with one of those palace guards while Odin sleeps, since it doesn't look like he'll be properly laid any time soon. Ha! Helblindi would love that - Loki losing what's left of his virginity to some low born, nameless palace guard. Loki would almost consider doing it just out of spite.

This is nothing but an idle fantasy, so for the time being Loki must settle for his own touch. He strokes himself to hardness and comes to the thought of a larger body pressed against his own. Sighing, Loki rinses away the traces of his spend and finishes washing his hair. He returns to Odin's side just in time to see him wake. Maybe it was the cold water that had completely defused Loki's bad mood; or maybe it was the orgasm. But when Odin smiles up at him adoringly, Loki unthinkingly, reflexively, smiles back.

***

Loki sleeps the entire day after the coronation and the entire day after that. He only gets up to snarf down some bread, cheese and fruit and to take a bath. It feels good to rest and relax for awhile, especially after the madness of the last few weeks.

By the third day, Loki is starting to feel anxious. Shouldn't Thor have called on him by now? Loki tries to think if he'd misstepped, if he'd displeased the King somehow. His memory of that night is somewhat patchy. Had he been too lifeless? Too shy and nervous and inexperienced for the king's liking? In his own defense, Loki could do nothing *but* lie there like a slab of meat. It's not his fault that he'd been too intoxicated to fully respond to Thor's touch. Ugh.

It's on the fourth day that Loki is finally sent for, and Loki could almost cry with relief.

He waits in the antechamber of the Imperial suite, chewing his lip and shifting his weight from one foot to the other. He fusses with his hair in a nearby mirror, although he knows he looks fine. His stomach flip-flops like he can't decide whether to be annoyed or anxious.

The King bursts into the room with a flourish, his face alight in a blinding smile. Loki startles, but quickly regains his composure and dips into his familiar bow of greeting.

“Loki,” Thor strides towards him, his cape flaring at his back. "Aren't you a sight for sore eyes!" He rests his hands on Loki’s shoulders, dipping his head to catch Loki’s eye. “You are well? Rested?”

There’s an air of urgency about him that immediately puts Loki on edge. But Thor doesn’t seem upset or angry. Rather the contrary; Thor seems greatly pleased to see him.

“Yes, Majesty,” Loki replies, flustered by the sudden onslaught of the King’s attention, to the point where he forgets to feel irritated at having been snubbed for four days. “I am. Thank you.”

“I haven’t much time,” Thor rasps, sliding his hands down Loki’s arms. His eyes twinkle. “I hope you’re not too sore...”

Thor hefts him off his feet and sets him on a nearby side table. The table’s width is shallow, barely wide enough to sit on, so that Loki’s back is pressed flush against the palace wall. Thor spreads Loki’s legs and stands between them, grinding impatiently between Loki’s thighs. He's hard already, the dog!

“*Oh,”* Loki says, breathless.

“I’ll go mad if I have to sit through the next five hours in a state of such desperation,” Thor pants hotly into Loki’s ear. His fingers are already sneaking up Loki’s thighs, past the hem of his skirts. Greedy fingers pry off Loki’s underthings and pull them down his legs. Loki would roll his eyes at Thor’s eagerness if he weren’t so shaken.

Everything is a hazy blur. Thor spears him in one solid thrust, making Loki cry out in pain. Loki is still not used to the feeling of being fucked, and the King’s cock is not exactly what one would call *insubstantial.* It hurts at first - Thor is too rough, as ever - but Loki is slickening from the sensation of Thor’s breath hot on his neck, his hands on his waist. The King shifts positions and rubs inside him, and Loki lets out an embarrassing mewlish noise. He instinctively locks his ankles behind Thor’s back, and Thor growls his name like it’s a curse word.

Thor’s every thrust rattles the table, making it go *clunk clunk clunk* against the far wall. A vase tumbles to the floor and shatters but Thor hardly pays it any heed, so engrossed is he in the act of rutting. Loki blinks back the stars in his eyes every time Thor’s cock hits home. All he can do is snake his arms behind the king’s neck and hold on.

Thor does not last long. He slams Loki hard before spending deep inside. He stills at last, panting to catch his breath.

“I missed you,” Thor says hoarsely. He smiles at him, lopsided, roguish and self-satisfied.

Loki’s cheeks pink. “I was waiting for Your Majesty’s call...”

Thor hums contentedly into Loki’s cheek and places a kiss there. “I thought to give you a few days rest. You must have been quite exhausted.” He pulls out and tucks himself away into his trousers. Loki gingerly sets himself on his feet. Thor looks impressively regal for having just fucked Loki into the wall, although there is a telltale glisten to his brow that wasn’t there before. Loki, meanwhile, feels sloppy. He can feel Thor’s cum seeping down his inner thigh.

Thor shoots him a lazy, wolfish grin. “I wish for you to join me again. Tonight.”

Loki can only nod dizzily. “Yes, my lord.”

“Do not bathe. I like to know you’ll be wet and dripping with it until I can properly breed you again.”

At that, Thor picks up Loki’s discarded underthings, holding them up to his nose and sniffing thoughtfully. With a definitive waggle of his eyebrows, he pockets them deep within his robes.

Loki lets out a garbled *as you wish.* Thor is practically laughing at him! Loki is annoyed at himself for getting so flustered.

Still chuckling, Thor take Loki’s hand and presses a kiss to the outer wrist.

“Till then.”

***

In the following weeks, Loki often finds himself being bent over tables or crowded up against

walls, fucked roughly like a dog takes a bitch. Thor is demanding after having been held off for so long, and there's little Loki can do except simply lie there and withstand the onslaught. Thor spends most of his evenings at banquet with dignitaries from all over the Realms - the coronation festivities drag on - so when he calls for Loki, it's usually in the early afternoons, after lunch, when the sun is high and the court is feeling lazy. Loki quickly learns to ready himself in preparation for the King's arrival, for he knows when Thor comes to him he'll be in an amorous mood, and half the time the king can't be bothered with any foreplay at all, electing instead to flip Loki over and enter him in one smooth thrust.

Loki cries out when Thor does this, his hair hanging in his face as Thor immediately sets a brutal rhythm. It's animalistic and far too rough. Thor grips a fistful of Loki's hair and wrenches his head back painfully, still buried to the root in Loki's body. Loki wails, his hands scrambling to keep himself upright as his back is forcefully arched. Thor stills completely, his breath humid on Loki's shoulder, and places a wet kiss to the back of Loki's sweaty neck.

"Come on my cock, Loki," Thor rasps into Loki's ear, but his tone honeysweet and playful. He grinds his prick in deep for emphasis, and Loki lets out a broken whimper. "Can you do that for me, sweetheart? Hmmm? Come from just getting your little cunt fucked?"

Loki grits his teeth in frustration. He can practically *hear* the smarmy grin in Thor's voice.

"I need you to go slower," Loki says. "Please."

Thor does, amazingly. The frantic pace he'd set ebbs to one that is more smooth, more rocking in nature. Loki much prefers it this way. Still acclimatizing to the feeling of being penetrated, Loki finds it much easier to take pleasure in sex when Thor isn't ramming into him.

With Thor thus subdued, Loki swivels his hips experimentally back onto Thor's cock. This feels...rather good, actually. He clenches down on the hot prick inside him and Thor groans in appreciation. Loki does it again and is rewarded by a fresh pulse of pleasure up his own spine. It is the curse of his body that Loki is so responsive, and every time Thor's cock rubs and stretches his insides just right, Loki lets out an involuntary moan.

Loki pushes back against Thor until Thor is sitting back on his haunches, and that Loki is half seated in Thor's lap, half on all fours. In this attitude, Loki has more control over the pace and depth of their lovemaking. Loki rocks himself back, focusing on the sensation of Thor's hard cock spearing his insides. It's not so bad, now that his body has stretched to accomodate it. It hurts less now than it did before. He can feel the arousal building in the bottom of his belly, aided in no small part by the weight of Thor's hands on his back, his hips, his shoulders. He must be putting on quite the wanton display, fucking himself on Thor's cock like this. He clenches down again and Thor curses behind him.

“Can you come for me?” Thor repeats.

“So long as you do not spill first, My lord,” Loki retorts breathlessly, because he can’t quite help himself.

Thor delivers a light slap to Loki’s ass. "Cheeky."

Thor reaches around to take hold of Loki’s cock and gives it a few pumps, and Loki’s hips stutter in their rhythm. Unused to the extra stimulation, Loki climaxes with a sob, spilling over the sheets below. It comes upon him so suddenly and so unexpectedly that Loki hardly has time to brace himself, and he bucks like a wild animal on Thor’s cock until the contractions subside.

Loki slumps forward onto the daybed, boneless and panting. Thor has yet to come, and is still as hard and as indomitable as ever.

Thor surges forward and presses Loki down into the mattress. At that, Thor once again lets loose his baser impulses, fucking Loki mercilessly before gripping him tight and spilling deep inside. Thor goes limp on Loki’s much smaller frame. He takes a moment to catch his breath, his ragged pants turning to lighthearted chuckles against Loki’s back. Thor gives Loki’s ass another appreciative pat - *you did well* - before rolling off and laying at Loki’s side.

“I had imagined you’d be a good lay,” Thor says with a contented sigh. He yawns, stretching indolently, and Loki uses the opportunity to shuffle closer and nestle under one of Thor’s arms.

“You imagined laying with me?” Loki teases.

Thor cracks an eye open, a ghost of a smile on his lips. “Aye, you vain little creature,” He reaches over and gives Loki a playful squeeze around his ribcage, which has the unfortunate effect of making Loki let out a ticklish squeal. “Many a time and oft. Is that what you wanted me to say?” Thor lies back down, grinning.

They lay in peaceable silence for awhile. Sunlight streams the curtains, and a light breeze cools Loki’s body. Loki’s eyes begin to droop.

Thor cracks opens his eyes and peeks at him. "Do you know any Jotun dances?"

"Jotun dances, Majesty?"

"Aye. Traditional dances. From Jotunheim."

Loki blinks a few times. "Yes, of course. It is where I learned my craft."

“Would you dance one for me?” Thor pouts. His expression is easy-going and indulgent. “I am to banquet one night with each ambassador from the Realms, and I thought it would be sign of goodwill for you to perform for the Jotnar delegate.”

Loki’s enthusiasm instantly dwindles, replaced instead with a knot of discomfort in his stomach.

“It would be an honor.”

“Excellent,” Thor hums, absently stroking Loki’s cheek with a knuckle. “I hope I am not overexerting you.”

He says this because Loki is also scheduled to dance that night.

“No, Majesty. I am always happy to dance for you.”

Thor’s grin widens, splitting his face in two, and Loki’s heartbeat flutters at the sight of it. “My sweet little dancer. I’ll have to find some way to reward you.”

Loki lowers his head modestly, in part because Thor’s smile is searing his eyeballs. “I’ll need proper music,” he says. “Jotunn music. For the Ambassador.”

Thor thumbs at Loki’s lower lip. “Of course.”

“And, mmph, the gilded anklets and headdress, those are traditional.”

“Whatever you desire.”

What Loki desires most of all is Thor’s kiss, but he knows he won’t get it - *not yet, anyway* - and to ask for it now would only spoil Thor’s good mood. As much as Loki wants to push forward, he knows he must be patient. Thor has warmed considerably to him, of that Loki is certain, but Loki can’t be sure if he’s earned enough of the King’s affection to start pressing for more conspicuous displays of royal favour.

Thor settles down then, his breath evening out like he’s on the verge of an afternoon catnap. His eyelashes fan out against his cheeks, and once again Loki is reminded of how handsome the King of Asgard is. Thor doesn’t seem to mind when Loki trails his hands over his chest. Rather the contrary; he hums encouragingly, which emboldens Loki to stroke down his shoulders and arms. On a whim, Loki uses a warming touch, and Thor lets out a deep rumble.

“Is that your magic?”

“Yes,” Loki answers. He purposefully does not tack on *majesty* or *master* to see if Thor will object, but to his delight, Thor does not even seem to notice. “Shall I stop?”

“Don’t you dare.”

Loki’s face splits into a grin. It’s looking less and less likely that Thor will bind his magic. Not when Loki makes it so useful to him.

“If I may be so bold,” Loki says, sitting up, “Might I suggest that Your Majesty roll on his front?”

Thor’s eyes open a slit, considering Loki for a moment, and then his lip twitches up like he knows where Loki is going with this. Without any fuss, he smoothly rolls over, laying with his arms cradled under his head. Loki swallows hard at being presented the vast expanse of Thor’s muscled back, rippling with strength and coiled power.

Thor lets out an amused noise at the way Loki seats himself astride his arse, but he does not object, for this is clearly the best position to allow Loki to work.They’re both quite naked, but Thor is shameless in his own nudity. A part of Loki resents him for it. Clearly, being nude does not instill

in him a feeling of vulnerability the way it does for Loki.

More embarrassingly, Loki knows Thor's cum is dripping out of him, and Loki is quite sure Thor can feel it. But Thor has no one else to blame but himself for that particular bit of debauchery, so there's really no point in feeling self-conscious about it.

Loki begins to knead at the muscle in Thor's neck and shoulders, and is immediately heartened by the groan of pleasure the king emits.

"Good?" Loki says innocently.

"Mmmmph," Thor says by way of response, the sound muffled by the pillow underneath Thor's face. Loki warms his touch and Thor downright shudders.

"Too much?"

Thor shakes his head. "More."

Loki obliges and digs his fingers deeper, working the meat of Thor's shoulder and kneading at his pressure points. The warmth from the magic helps to undo the knots of tension, and Thor groans appreciatively. Yes, he'll be hard-pressed to bind Loki's magic after this.

"Right there. "

"Here?"

"*Hnng*." Thor seems to be melting into the bedding. "Where were you on my campaign to Svartalfheim?"

Loki laughs. He rakes his nails in Thor's shaggy blonde hair and delights in the shiver it elicits.

"The mighty King of Asgard, reduced to a purring kitten," Loki teases gently. "I could ask anything of you now."

“I wager you could...”

Loki simply continues his ministrations, digging his fingers deep into Thor’s muscles, rubbing down his back and over his shoulders, down his spine and along his waist. Save for the occasional soft hum of pleasure, Thor is placid and still under him. Tamed, even. Loki decides he likes Thor best like this. So relaxed and malleable. Agreeable. It’s hard to be afraid of him at all.

Loki immerses himself fully in his task, his own body still thrumming pleasantly with orgasm. He finds he doesn’t mind doing this for Thor. If this is what life with Thor could be like….well. There are certainly worse fates to be had.

Having lost track of time, Loki hardly even notices when an attendant slips into their chamber. At the sound of the door closing Loki gasps, scrambling to cover his nudity with the sheet. He scowls as soon as he sees who it is - the same steward who had ripped Loki out of Thor’s arms on coronation night.

The man narrows his eyes at Loki, then dips his head in a bow.

“Pardon, Majesty,” he says softly, “It is mid-afternoon….nearly two o’clock…..”

Underneath Loki’s thighs, Thor makes what could only be called a petulant huff. “Council can be rescheduled.”

The steward hems like he’s unsure if Thor is being serious or not, and there’s a long awkward moment where no one moves and no one says anything. But then Thor grunts and shifts under Loki: a silent cue for Loki to move off of him. Loki does, still clutching the sheet against his chest. Even if this steward is a eunuch as they say, Loki doesn’t like the thought of him seeing Loki in any state of undress.

Thor rolls on his back, his manhood quite exposed, but he pays no heed. Thor makes another huffing noise before shooing the attendant away with a flick of his hand.

“Very well. I will be but a moment.”

The attendant bows and exits, shooting Loki one more wary glance before he departs. Loki tries to think if he's heard that man's name before. If that steward thinks Loki's forgotten how he treated him on coronation night, he's got another thing coming.

Thor huffs for what must be the third time and rubs at his eyes.

"Must you go?" Loki says softly.

"It *pains* me," Thor oozes. He's laying spread on the mattress as if he's been liquified. "But yes. Help me dress, pet. And cover yourself, for gazing upon your naked flesh does nothing to strengthen my resolve."

It's only after Thor leaves that Loki comes down from his high. It's nearly evening and Loki doubts Thor will come to him again. It seems like, as ever, he'll be sleeping alone in his harem cell tonight.

Nonetheless, Thor seems more than happy to lavish him with any kind of material gift: furs, silks, perfumes and oils. Soon enough, Loki's jewelry box is stocked with all kinds of shiny knick-knacks and baubles. The moonstone pendant is still by far his prize possession, however, and Loki wears it as much as possible around the palace grounds. The other harem girls look upon him with jealous, narrowed eyes; the royal favourite is always a pariah among their peers. Loki tries not to pay them any heed. So long as he has Thor's interest, no one can touch him.

And that's the way Loki intends to keep it.

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Thor was born for the throne of Asgard, that much is true. He navigates courtly life with an easy grace borne of a lifetime of privilege. His every word and action is effortlessly confident. He has a certain natural showman flair that gives his court a lively, energetic air. His voice commands respect. He is eagerly obeyed by all, lest his famous temper be provoked. No one dares cross him.

Loki executes his dance perfectly, and this time isn't shy to let loose a bit of fireworks for artistic effect. Afterwards, Loki is beckoned towards Thor's throne. He obediently kneels before his master and kisses his cape - being still too low in status to kiss his ruby ring as a courtier would. Thor nods at him, and it's only by the slight smile on his lips that Loki knows he's pleased him at all.

This Thor - *King* Thor - does not allow Loki to speak or act freely, or address him with anything other than the strictest formality.

This Thor is aloof and intimidating.

This Thor acts like he hadn't held Loki close and bedded him so sweetly mere hours before.

It's only in private when Thor is himself again, embracing Loki, kissing his cheek and making his affection known. Loki swallows down his bitterness as best as he is able, but he must be stiff in Thor's arms, because Thor notices something is amiss. Thor pulls back, his brows knotted, and cups Loki's cheek.

"Is something troubling you, Lokes?"

Loki fights the urge to sneer at the endearment. The most infuriating thing is that Thor probably would not even understand why Loki is upset. For Thor, this is just the way of things: he is one person in public, another in private. And Loki is hardly one to be complaining of disingenuousness.

Yes, Loki wants to scream. *Yes, something is troubling me. I am still just a slave to you. Do you not know who I was on Jotunheim?*

Loki smiles and shakes his head. "No, my King. I am well."

Thor side-eyes him, like he can see straight through Loki's artifice. He seems uncertain.

"You were beautiful today," he says. "You pleased me very much. I'll have more robes tailored for you, of the finest silk. And perhaps even a sable fur coat. Hmmm? Would you like that?"

"Yes Majesty. You are most generous."

Thor frowns, but does not press. He collapses into an armchair with a weary omph, sighing in what sounds like frustration. He rubs his temples underneath his crown.

“I cannot be seen to be frivolous with sentiment,” he says tiredly. “I know that’s why you are upset.”

Loki whips his head up. Well then. He is perhaps more astute than Loki gave him credit for.

“Especially given your….heritage,” Thor goes on, now somewhat awkwardly. “Many at court disapprove that I have taken you as my favourite. This is what it means to be my lover, Loki. If I am cold it is only because I must be. I am King; I do not belong fully to myself. To show you special treatment would be interpreted as weakness.”

Not for the first time, Loki is reminded of how very similar Thor is to Odin: the way his forehead creases, the unhappy set of his mouth when something is bothering him. And as much as Loki wants to let Thor stew, Loki knows it’s not in his best interest to do so. He’s worked hard to establish some rapport with Thor. It would be unproductive to sour it on account of Loki’s pride. Thor has opened up to him, therefore Loki must be gracious.

“Thank you for your concern and forthrightness,” Loki says softly. “It means more to me than any jewel. I understand that you are bound by your station, and you must abide by it. I was...being childish. I sometimes forget your duty comes first.”

Loki approaches Thor cautiously and is heartened when Thor accepts him into his lap. Loki is seated astride him. Pressed so intimately together, Loki can feel him between his legs, the warmth there building, and Loki knows, unequivocally, that this encounter will end in sex.

“It must be difficult,” Loki goes on carefully. “To be who you are. So much responsibility placed upon your shoulders.”

Thor narrows his eyes. “You think me unfit?”

“Nay, my lord. Truly you are the most capable prince to have ever graced the throne of Asgard. I am merely suggesting that, perhaps, when you are not fulfilling your public role, you might forgo such formalities...”

“I do,” Thor says with a weary laugh. “More than I should.”

He seems tired, like perhaps all the ceremonies and formal banquets are wearing him down. He looks older already, and Loki wonders if maybe he's mourning his father more than he lets on.

"If only I could bear some of your burden." Loki twines some of Thor's golden hair between his fingers idly, "Let you lay down your worries, if for a moment…"

Loki's fingertips travel upwards to caress the crown Thor is wearing. It's not his ceremonial one, but his everyday circlet, embellished with a lovely deep ruby in the centre. Although it's simple, the workmanship is superb. How grand it would look upon his own head.

Then, as if acting on impulse, Loki plucks the crown off Thor's head and places it on his own. The thing is heavier than Loki expects, but he immediately decides he *likes it.*

"Now I am queen," Loki declares, but makes sure to lace his words with a touch of playfulness to make it obvious that he is jesting. The last thing Loki wants to do is provoke the king's temper. It's just a bit of fun, meant only to distract. Surely Thor can see that.

Now, for all that Thor insists upon propriety when they are in public, Loki knows there's certain amount of wiggle-room to allow for a bit of banter when they are alone together. Thor appreciates wit, and he likes being entertained. To keep his interest requires that Loki be, well, *interesting.* Being a servile, quiet little mouse of a slave would only get him by for so long.

Anyone can be *pretty.* But only Loki can be Loki.

Thor only stares back at him, unblinking, and for a brief, awful moment Loki thinks he's made a terrible mistake.

"Is that so?" Thor asks at length.

"Yes," Loki confirms, gaining confidence. "Now the business of rulership, with all its trials and tribulations, falls upon me…."

The corners of Thor's lips twitch into a ghost of an amused smile. "You mean to rule, then."

Loki grins coquettishly; he does relish Thor's little indulgent moods. Loki tilts his chin up, like the aristocratic brat he knows, deep down, he is.

"I will have the Realms at my feet, and all will fear and respect me."

"Big words, for one so small," Thor clicks his tongue, and Loki can't help but inwardly bristle at his patronizing tone. If only Thor knew the power that dwells in Loki's fingertips, he would not be so quick to scoff.

"I may be small," Loki concedes, "But pound for pound, you would not find a warrior in all your legions with more ferocity and fearlessness than me."

It feels good to say it, to Thor's face no less, even if Thor believes him to be jesting.

"Oh, I have little doubt of that," Thor's eyes crinkle at the corners, "Nor one as graceful and lovely."

"If you think me too beautiful to be cruel, you would be mistaken." Loki says, his eyes glimmering with malice. "I would not hesitate to do what is necessary to keep hold of power. Neither compassion nor pity would move me. And if they find me cruel for it," Loki shrugs, "Then so be it."

"A Queen of Ice," Thor smirks, amusement now writ plain upon his face. "But I must warn you, little one, such brutality is not without consequence. The Realms would not tolerate a despot. Pray, what will you do when your enemies rise up in rebellion against you?"

Loki frowns inwardly. *Little one,* indeed. Size means nothing in the face of pure, unbridled magic. At times like these, Loki regrets how vehemently he'd belittled his own power. One day Thor might regret speaking to him so condescendingly. One day, perhaps, Thor might look upon him with the respect and awe befitting a witch of Loki's calibre.

But because Loki can't reply as he'd like, he widens his eyes and pitches his voice high and sweet, the picture of pure youthful innocence.

"Then," he says, "I will *crush them.*"

Thor laughs then, bright and incredulous, rumbling under Loki's thighs. It's a low, raspy sound, warm and - dare he think it - *fond.* Loki decides he likes it. He likes making Thor laugh in earnest, even if it's at his own expense. Thor is in a better mood already, Loki can tell, and Loki is rather pleased that he'd managed to lift the king's spirits so easily, without even having to spread his legs.

"Woe betide anyone who crosses you, pet!" Thor says, his hand skimming up Loki's thigh. "A queen's traditional role is to broker peace. To intercede on her subjects' behalf, to plead for mercy. And here you are, warmongering like a tyrant!"

Loki tilts his head. "Would I be, in any regard, a *traditional* queen?"

Thor returns Loki's grin with a lazy one of his own. He's so relaxed under Loki's thighs, so placid, Loki can't resist pushing the fantasy a little further….

"And if I am queen," Loki muses, "Then that would make you *my* slave..."

The mood of the room instantly shifts, a tense silence falling between them. Thor stills, his smile fading into a stony, unreadable expression.

Helblindi always called him impulsive, and perhaps Loki is. It's what got him into trouble in the first place. Impulsivity and Pride: Loki's twin vices. What a poor slave he makes! He's simply not *suited* to a life of servitude. Loki marvels that he'd lasted so long in Asgard without getting his head lopped off.

An apology is just beginning to form on the tip of Loki's tongue when Thor wets his lips, a low growl rumbling in his chest.

"What would my Queen ask of me?"

Now it's Loki's turn to blink back his surprise. In truth, he hadn't expected Thor to be so amenable to their little roleplay. Loki is playing with fire and he knows it, but he can't help but wonder how far he could take this. Loki is overcome by greediness. He wants so much. Too much: riches, luxury, power, *freedom.* But Loki's not stupid. He knows it would be pointless to make such demands right now. As with Thor's kiss, these things will come in time.

So for now, Loki will ask for something Thor doesn't even know he wants to give.

"I want to lay you down, slave," Loki says lowly, carefully, thumbing over Thor's plush lower lip, "And let me ride you until I take my fill of pleasure."

Thor's eyes go dark, his nostrils flaring once, twice. Then, in one swift motion, Thor grasps Loki underneath his thighs and hefts them both off the couch. Loki has to throw his arms around Thor's shoulders and lock his legs around Thor's waist to keep himself upright, but luckily manages to swallow down his surprised squeak.

"Bedroom," Loki says, swallowing down the shakiness in his voice.

To Loki's amazement, Thor obeys, and hauls him towards the Imperial bedroom, eagerly nipping at Loki's neck all the while. This in itself is something of a great personal victory: Loki hadn't entered the Imperial bedroom since the last time he was with Odin, and he'd been somewhat miffed by the fact that thus far, Thor had elected to fuck him everywhere *but* in his proper bed.

Well, not this time.

Although he can tell it's been renovated to suit Thor's taste, Loki is far too distracted by the task at hand to take a proper look around. Thor's hands are hot under his thighs, his lips insistent at Loki's collarbone. He's much more eager for this than Loki could have ever anticipated, and Loki thrills in his enthusiasm. Loki is sure no one has ever done this to him before; no one would have *dared.* But at the same time, Loki knows he must play this exactly right. For this to work, Loki must be as in control as possible, without actually overstepping his bounds. A fine line, indeed.

Loki wriggles to be set down, which Thor does with great reluctance. Loki takes a few steps back to compose himself before issuing his next order.

"Undress," Loki says, with as much confidence as he can muster. Given the circumstances, Loki thinks he's doing a fine job of keeping his composure. It's surprisingly difficult not to tack *master* or *majesty* onto everything he says, especially given the way Thor is looking at him now.

Thor simply stands there, the square of his shoulders predatory, his eyes black with lust and his fingers twitching at his sides. He looks like he wants to lunge at Loki and take him right there on the marble floor. But Loki is Queen right now, and he's not about to let that happen if he can help it.

“Undress,” Loki repeats, although his voice is somewhat less sure this time. But Thor obeys, and slowly begins to unclasp his armor. His undershirt comes off next - almost ripped apart in Thor’s haste - then his belt and vambraces. Thor kicks off his boots, and finally reaches for the drawstring of his trousers. Loki can already tell from the outline in the fabric that he’s hard, and when Thor steps out of his pants, Loki isn’t disappointed.

And what a magnificent specimen Thor is. Broad and tall, gilded and muscled, he truly would make a perfect stud slave, ideal for siring strong healthy children. Loki, embarrassingly, slickens at the thought.

Loki runs his hands over Thor’s chest reverently, thumbing over a nipple, making Thor emit that growling noise again. Knowing he oughtn’t keep the him waiting any longer, Loki reaches lower to take Thor’s cock into his fist.

“The slavers told me you’d be big,” Loki breathes, beginning to get into it now. He looks up at Thor through his eyelashes. “And as hard as steel.”

Thor’s jaw clenches like he wants to say something - a warning perhaps, or some threat. But whatever it is dies on his lips when Loki gives him a tentative stroke.

“You little demon,” Thor murmurs.

Loki smirks, but isn’t quite ready to let Thor derail his fantasy just yet. It’s exhilarating to have him like this, The Great King of Asgard, fucking helplessly into Loki’s fist like an inexperienced boy. Power is not always allocated on the sand of battlefield, or on the marble floor of the council chamber. Sometimes, the greatest power of all is found upon silk sheets.

Loki gives Thor a few firmer strokes.

“They said you rut like a bull.” he goes on sinfully.

At this, Thor groans, his muscles convulsing under his skin, and. Loki senses he’s about at the end of his tether. Best to move forwards with the proceedings, else Loki could find himself bent over the bed rather than on top of it.

“Undress me,” Loki says. His voice is softer this time, and Thor responds in kind, tugging Loki’s shift up over his head with more gentleness than when he’d undressed himself. Loki shimmies out of his underthings next, but elects to keep on his jewelry. The crown still sits perched upon his head, a heavy yet pleasurable weight. Loki is not ready to part with it just yet. Gently, Loki pushes Thor backwards onto the bed, and Thor lays back slowly, keeping his eyes ever fixated on Loki. His cock lays on his stomach, thick and heavy and demanding attention. Loki swallows hard at the sight of it.

Loki climbs up on Thor and settles on his thighs. Thor is tense underneath him, impatient, and Loki knows there’s probably nothing he wants more than to drag Loki down on his cock and really start fucking. His restraint is impressive given that for the last few weeks, Loki’s found himself being grabbed roughly and bent over more times than he can count.

Loki takes Thor’s hands and guides them up over his head. He squeezes Thor’s wrists to let him know to keep them there.

“This is about my pleasure,” Loki says hotly into Thor’s ear, although it really isn’t. When he releases Thor’s wrists, Thor does not move them, so Loki takes the opportunity to run his hands down Thor’s chest a second time. The warm, solid muscle feels good under Loki’s palms.

Loki knows he can’t drag this out much longer, so without more ado he takes Thor’s cock in hand and guides it to his vaginal entrance. Loki sinks down slowly, taking Thor inch by inch, his eyes fluttering closed at the sensation of being filled so thoroughly. Loki’s not sure he’ll ever become accustomed to Thor’s size. Every time, it’s like he’s stretching out his insides anew, carving a place for himself inside Loki’s body. Now, at least, Loki has some time to adjust before they start fucking in earnest. Maybe not more than a moment or two, but still.

Thor makes the most satisfying guttural groan when Loki bottoms out, his hands clenching above his head. He’s breathing hard, and Loki knows it must be a struggle for him to hold himself back. His hips buck slightly in a vain attempt for stimulation.

“Move,” Thor croaks, more a plea than an order, so Loki does not chide him for it. Loki begins gently, rocking up then down again, his hands on Thor’s chest for balance. Thor is looking up at him with hooded, blackened eyes, and Loki feels himself blush. He closes his eyes and tries a more sensual roll of his hips, clenching down on Thor’s cock as he does so. Thor groans and bucks upwards, although there’s not much he can do with his hands above his head.

And because Thor has not forbidden it, Loki reaches down to palm at himself, selfishly chasing his own pleasure. He’s hard by now, *and* wet, *and* he’s sure Thor must think him the most wanton whore in all of Asgard. He fucks himself on Thor more vigorously now, the way he knows Thor likes, until his thighs begin to burn with the strain. He slows suddenly and Thor growls in

frustration.

“Loki…” Thor warns.

“I just wish to look at you a moment,” Loki says breathlessly, reaching over to cup Thor’s face. He traces his fingers down Thor’s cheek, then reaches down to grip Thor by the throat. Loki squeezes slightly and feels Thor swallow under his palm. “Yes, you will fill my belly with strong, handsome children, won’t you?”

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At that, Thor’s hands fly down to grip Loki’s hips, so tight Loki’s sure he’ll leave bruises. Loki lets out a surprised noise, but he decides to allow Thor’s defiance, for it truly seems like Thor is on the verge of having an aneurysm.

“*Move, Loki,”* he growls, “All my kingdom if you just *move.”*

Loki really has no choice in the matter, because Thor is now forcing Loki’s hips into a punishing rhythm, and Loki has little choice but to accept it.

“Ah,” Loki squeezes his eyes shut as pleasure shoots up his spine. It hurts but it also feels *wonderful* - deeply fulfilling in the way his own fingers never were. Thor’s cock fills him so completely, so utterly. With a roar, Thor surges forward and reverses their positions, upturning Loki so that he’s the one on his back. Loki’s crown slips off and clatters to the floor beside the bed, but Thor doesn’t even seem to notice. He fucks Loki into the mattress with hard, violent thrusts that rock Loki forward several inches each time. Loki whimpers, overstimulated, but he’s otherwise too limp and weak to do anything but lie there and take it. As ever, Thor is too heavy, too rough, and Loki struggles even to breathe, but if he could, he might even laugh - Thor really does rut like a bull.

When Thor comes Loki swears he hears thunder. Thor squeezes him tight to keep him in place, and freezes, his cock embedded deep in Loki’s cunt, where he spills in a great, warm gush. Thor gives a few more weak, half-hearted thrusts before collapsing completely, panting hotly into Loki’s neck, still save for his heavy breathing. Into Loki’s shoulder Thor begins to chuckle, low and raspy, the sound soon building to an outright laugh. And because they’re pressed belly to belly, Loki feels it reverberate against his stomach. If Loki weren’t so utterly ruined, he might’ve demanded what the hell is so funny.

“You’re mad, you know that? Hmmm?” Thor chuckles into Loki’s ear, warm and fond. He pulls back to look down at Loki, grinning at him like an idiot. His hair is a frizzy halo of gold around his head.

“So you have told me,” Loki answers, and Thor laughs again. He ducks his head down and Loki *swears* he’s about to be kissed - the thought alone makes Loki’s heart flutter in excitement. Loki tilts his head up obligingly to receive it, but instead, Thor nuzzles his nose against Loki’s like an affectionate puppy. Not quite a kiss, but an approximation of one.

Thor flops down on his back at Loki’s side, making Loki immediately regret the loss of contact. Loki cuddles up close to the King in his great imperial bed, the first time they’d fucked like a proper couple. Thor looks dopey and placated, his skin glistening with sweat, his cheeks ruddy. Thor is a mess, just as Loki knows he’s a mess. They lie there, entangled in each other, until exhaustion begins to set in.

“That wasn’t…” Thor says, filling the silence, “very queenly behaviour.”

“And I am no traditional queen.” Loki replies, and the King, to Loki’s satisfaction, laughs.

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It is with great interest that Thor looks down from his throne, surveying the crowd of courtiers and delegates who have amassed to witness this performance. Their faces are curious, suspicious even, but overall the mood is light and not overly tense. Thor, too, is keen to see what Loki has prepared. In fact, this is the *only* thing Thor’s been looking forward to about this evening. Dinner with the Jotun Ambassador had been cordial - not terribly unpleasant - but it’s not as though Thor had been enjoying himself. Keeping company with the Ambassador is not exactly Thor’s idea of a good time. Many centuries have passed since there had been a Jotun Ambassador in Asgard, and Thor does not blame either side for looking upon the other with mistrust. There is a tenuous peace between their realms, and while Thor does not want to exacerbate already strained diplomatic relations, he also wants to make it clear to the Jotuns that he’s still the Overlord of all the Realms. So long as the Casket of Ancient Winters is in Asgardian hands, the Jotunns are impotent, and if they think they will get it back by plying Thor with mediocre tribute, they will find themselves sorely mistaken.

The centre of the floor is empty and Loki is nowhere to be seen. But the music begins regardless, a dark, thrumming, ominous drone. The sound intensifies, building and building, until a drum

sounds, and Loki appears in a flash of magic.

They've marked him with henna tattoos: slim, reddish lines that criss-cross his body, mimicking the raised tracks most Jotuns sport on their skin. There's also red warpaint slathered across his eyes, and his hair is pinned back under a headdress of gold and feathers. He looks…..very Jotunn-like, although his skin is as pale and smooth as ever. Thor wonders, fleetingly, what Loki must have looked like before he was blanched. It's hard to imagine him as being….well, blue. He must have been blue once, surely? Thor can hardly believe such a delicate creature is of the same race as the hulking Jotunn who sits next to him.

The drummers beat out an odd, uneven sounding rhythm, and a man begins to sing in a language Thor doesn't understand. There is a rawness to Loki's Jotun dancing, an earthen sensuality that wasn't quite as salient in his coronation performance. Loki crouches low to the ground, almost predatorily, whipping his hair in that brazen manner of his and rolling his hips. It's exotic and tribal, even animalistic, and Thor - ever the sucker for novelty - *likes* it. And Thor's not the only one: Loki has the entire court enthralled. Loki always has his audience eating out of his hand.

The drum beat changes, faster now, and Loki keeps pace, twirling and flipping backwards over his head. He completes a tumbling pass that has the crowd gasping, gaining speed with the accelerating rhythm of the music. The drum beat is heavy, and the man sings like he's chanting some ancient spell. It builds and builds and Loki spins, stopping abruptly at the exact moment the music does. Usually Loki likes to end his dances with a dramatic drop to the ground, but this time, he remains standing, tall and proud and completely still. The effect is powerful. The crowd erupts into wild applause, their previous apprehension withering in the face of such marvellous spectacle.

"So it is true," The Ambassador says, clapping his mighty hands. "Great King Thor has found himself a Jotunn runt."

Thor grins, pleased beyond measure. He beckons Loki closer to the throne, and Loki obeys, climbing up the dias to stand before the King and the Ambassador.

"Majesty," he greets, kneeling to the floor at Thor's feet. As something of a compromise, Thor allows Loki to kiss the inside of his palm, but because this is a state event, he does not let him sit in his lap the way Thor would have preferred.

"Wonderful my sweet," Thor says, beaming. "A most impressive performance, as ever. I have never seen anything like it."

"Truly masterful," The Jotunn adds. "I must say I had been skeptical of your talent, but you have

exceeded my every expectation. Your skill rivals that of any dancer trained by the great master Angrboda. Come, let me see you."

Loki looks up. The red paint around his eyes gives him a feral appearance, but his face is otherwise neutral and expressionless.

"My my," Helblindi breaths, his lips curling in a smile. "Surely no runt on Jotunheim matches your loveliness. What is your name, little one?"

"Loki, my lord." Loki answers.

"Loki!" the massive Jotun exclaims, "A fine name for a very fine dancer." Helblindi turns back to Thor, "Pray, how did you acquire him?"

"He was my father's," Thor explains, a hint of pride in his voice, "A gift from a Vanir Lord, so I've heard. But beyond that I know not."

"The runtlings do have an unfortunate tendency to wind up in slavery," Helblindi says, nodding his head gravely. "Their beauty and grace works against them in this regard."

Thor frowns. It sounds so *flippant* like that. So inevitable.

"They are much sought after in Jotunheim. Many enter bondage as spoils of war, or as reparations to settle blood feuds and debts. Others are forced into concubinage to create alliances between families.They are said to make excellent lovers and companions. You are very fortunate to have obtained one."

Thor cocks his head to catch Loki's eye, but Loki's gaze is set firmly on the floor. He's sitting so still, Thor wonders if he's cowed by the Jotun Ambassador's presence.

"And you, Loki?" Thor asks, softening his voice so as not to intimidate Loki further. "How did you come into servitude?"

Loki's face betrays nothing. "My brother sold me into slavery," he says tonelessly, then falls silent

once again.

"How very tragic," Ambassador Helblindi says, nodding his head in sympathy. "Sadly, not an uncommon occurrence for one of your kind. But look where you are now, hmm? You were meant to be bed by a king, weren't you, little one. I'm sure Laufey-King would have snatched you up too if he had had the chance."

Thor sits, tense, and takes another sip of wine. He's unsure of what to make of this new information, and is rather horrified at the blasé manner in which Loki had related it. *His own brother.* Gods above, these Jotnar are more barbaric than Thor thought. Familial bonds are sacred. Have they no sense of honour?

"Yes indeed," Helblindi goes on thoughtfully, his eyes now skimming over Loki in a way Thor doesn't quite like. "And locked away in chastity for good measure."

Thor perks up in curiosity at this, so Helblindi clarifies.

"Chastity, Great King; a spiked, locked belt to ensure a runt's fidelity. The fertile ones are simply too enticing for their own good, and many fall into temptation when they are heated. Some say it is a cruel practice, but then again, is there anything more despicable than to cuckold a King? This one," Helblindi looks down at Loki, "Does not appear to be of age yet, so I would not be concerned; but when his time comes, it is something Your Majesty might want to consider."

Thor sits back in his throne and takes another sip of wine. He looks down at Loki again, and finds that Loki has yet to move a single inch.

"If I may be so bold," Helblindi goes on, "Within your tribute Laufey-king has included many garments of pleated spider-silk - the most delicate, finely crafted material in all of Jotunheim - and it seems to me that your runtling would wear them well….."

Thor thinks he remembers seeing something like that among his tribute….although in truth, Thor's interest had been drawn more towards the ceremonial suit of walrus-ivory armor. In the last few weeks, Thor has received so many marvellous gifts from across the realms, it is hard to keep track.

"Aye….I think I would like to see him so attired. I thank you, Ambassador, for your generosity. Please convey my gratitude to your master."

The Jotun nods in acknowledgement and raises his glass. They toast to peace, and drink to a bright, prosperous future.

Loki comes to Thor later that night, the red warpaint washed from his face and his hair loose, although the henna tattoos still linger on his skin. He dons a simple robe of pleated spider silk and Thor mentally thanks Helblindi for his suggestion. The fabric clings to Loki's trim figure like a second skin, igniting Thor's lust anew. It's almost as though the garment was made for him.

Thor is unsure of how to address the revelation of Loki's origins, so instead he takes Loki in his arms and fucks him sweetly, and afterwards, lets him sleep in his arms through the night. Perhaps that is enough to convey all that Thor wishes he could say.

Chapter End Notes

The dresses I linked to are all Delphos gowns by Mariano Fortuny. Nobody really knows how he pleated the silk like that.

Feedback is always lovely! xoxo

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I suppose you thought that was very funny," Loki says aloud, without looking up. "Chastity belts, indeed."

Loki is sitting in the window seat, curled up with a cupful of tea and a good book. Most days, he has many hours to kill while he waits for Thor to finish his official duties. It used to drive him mad with boredom, sitting around as idle as a housecat, but his days have become much less tedious now that Thor has allowed him to once again make visits to the Imperial Library.

And here he'd hoped to have a nice, relaxing, peaceful afternoon. *Alone.* Sigh.

The bird cocks its head.

"I would have advised Laufey as such, yes," The bird replies, more telepathically than anything, "For you, my brother, are of a lusty nature, and I shudder to think how wanton you will become once you are heated."

Loki rolls his eyes and sets his book down. "I'm beginning to think you harbour a secret, incestuous desire for me, given how much you obsess over what is between my legs."

"I am your guardian."

"And a fine job you are doing, too."

"Which is why," the bird goes on, "I have come to check on you."

"Little need," Loki says airily, picking at a cuticle. "I am doing well enough on my own, without your help. The king is besotted with me."

"*Besotted*," Helblindi-bird quirks what would've been his eyebrow, if a bird really had one. "He

didn't even bind you for that little disappearing trick of yours."

Loki shrugs. "Thor had knowledge of my magical craft before the coronation ceremony. It is not the practice of magic that seems to have disturbed him, but the fact that I'd kept it a secret. I have my made my magic…..useful to him."

Helblindi's bird-face makes no expression, but Loki knows he's amused at the insinuation. It grates at Loki to reveal something so private to his brother, and more than a little humiliating.

"He did not punish you for it?"

"Only to a night in the Underground, which is where I'll spend the rest of my days if I am discovered to be talking to you, so I'd appreciate you ceasing your blabbering and get on with whatever you came here to tell me."

"I was appointed to Asgard to help you," Helblindi says, "But I cannot hold this form for long."

"You should not be here at all," Loki says flatly.

"Then I will be brief." Helblindi fluffs his feathers. "Laufey is getting impatient. He thinks you are not being as industrious as you could be."

Loki bristles, whipping his head up to face the bird, although he's careful to keep his voice down. "Have you not seen for yourself how far I've come? How much the king favors me? He *hated* me when Odin fell into sleep. He would have sent me to some backwater brothel out of spite if he hadn't so badly wanted to bed me himself. It wasn't my fault that Odin fell into sleep when he did! I need time, damn you! These things take *time!*"

"Time is something we do not have," Helblindi counters. "Jotunheim is ever fading. If we do not acquire the Casket soon, I fear she will wither away completely."

How tragic, Loki thinks.

"You must be proactive," Helblindi goes on. "Being the king's favourite grants you access to his

inner chambers. If you cannot pry his secrets from him, perhaps a more…..forthright approach is warranted."

"Yes, a brilliant idea. I shall just waltz into the Hall of Records, put my feet up, and leisurely read my fill of state documents."

Helblindi-bird narrows his eyes. "Why don't you?"

"There are magic wards everywhere," Loki snaps. "You think I haven't tried? The Hall of Records is impenetrable; I would be discovered in an instant if I were to attempt such a vain and foolish thing. No. That is not the way." Loki clenches his jaw in determination. "Thor will slip, once he comes to trust me. He will offer his secrets to me. *Freely.* Like the fool I know him to be."

Helblindi cocks his head. "You really think he'd tell his secrets to a slave."

Loki truly hates the ways he says that word. So full of disdain, as if he had no hand in crafting Loki's current predicament.

"I am his confidante, his companion. I am no mere *slave* to him." Loki tilts his head up. "And I do not serve him like one."

The bird nods, although is still rather obviously unconvinced. "Well, if you think you are so capable. But be quick about it, silvertongue, before he tires of you. You know how his eye strays."

An uncomfortable pang hits Loki in the chest. He isn't sure why he feels the need to defend his relationship with Thor so vehemently, but the words spill out in a jumble nonetheless. "He hasn't. Not since - since his coronation. It's only been me."

Helblindi laughs, airy. "Is that what you believe?"

"I know it to be true." Loki says forcefully. "I am his only lover."

"You are with him all day?" Helblindi presses, his voice mocking. "Does he take you to bed each night? How can you be sure?" The bird shakes his head. "Oh, my brother. My beautiful, stupid

brother. I am merely trying to drive home the pressing nature of the task at hand. The king has a harem-full of beautiful women. You are indeed his favourite, I have no doubt about that, but his favour is fleeting. Make it count, while you can."

"Time, brother," Loki says irritably. "I will make him love me, and I will uncover everything you wish to know."

"See that you do." Helblindi says. "Your freedom depends on it."

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Sif is grinning over her cards, and Thor knows, at this point, she can't be bluffing. The stakes are too high, and Sif's smile is a little too broad and too…..unsettling. Sif is not usually a risk-taker when she gambles, but then again, Sif is cunning. Maybe her hand is rubbish. All Thor knows is that he can't possibly fold now. It's a matter of principle.

"Oh, I'm in," Sif says, grinning malevolently over her cards. Usually when she smiles like that, some poor creature is about to meet a terrible demise. Today, it seems, that creature is Thor. "You?"

"Till the bitter end," Thor declares, always spurred on by a good challenge. "What's your wager?"

"Why not make it interesting?" Sif says, like Thor hasn't got his best horse and over a thousand gold coin riding on this. Fandral and Volstagg exchange wary glances, clearly relieved that they'd folded long ago.

"If you think I'd risk my heirloom battleaxe you are dreaming."

"No, this is better," Sif says, her smile now splitting her face. "If I lose," Sif begins slowly, "I vow to wear that gown your grandmother made for me to my birthday party."

“The orange one?” Thor says incredulously, “With the -”

“Puffed sleeves and green trim.” Sif says. “You remember.”

Thor smirks. Does he *ever.* He almost turned purple holding in his laughter when Sif had received it a few birthdays past. Her having to graciously thank his grandmother for it was even funnier.

“I’m sure you’d enjoy seeing me don it, and on my own birthday nonetheless.”

Thor grins back at her. There’s no question that he would. Perhaps *too* much.

“The entire evening?”

“Of course.”

“And repel all potential suitors,” Volstagg adds, earning him a punch to the shoulder from Sif.

“A welcome reprieve indeed!” She laughs. “At last, a night of peace.”

Thor chuckles, but in truth Sif’s confidence has only kindled in him a flicker of concern: her willingness to place this bet is making him doubt his odds. “And what would you have of me in return?”

“If I win,” Sif turns back to Thor. “I want you to dance the Quicktrot at my party.”

Fandral and Volstagg make an ominous *oooooooo* sound.

“I don’t dance,” Thor says.

“And I don’t wear horrid orange taffeta gowns,” Sif counters, undaunted by Thor’s sour reaction. “That’s the point of a wager. So are you in or not?”

His friends look to him expectantly, their eyes wide with anticipation. Thor feels something like a trapped animal, backed into a corner with no means of escape. Sif has always wanted Thor to learn to dance, and as much as he wants to refuse this wager, it *is* her birthday, Thor knows it would mean a lot to her if he were to accept.

“Aye,” Thor says with a defeated sigh. “I’m in.”

“Lay down your cards,” Sif says, and Thor does.

Four damn Queens. Thor isn’t even surprised.

Sif’s face erupts into a gleeful laugh. “Ready your dancing shoes, my friend. I’ll expect several turns out of you that night. Perhaps you can practise while I am taking your beloved Gullfaxi out for a ride?”

Thor groans. He’d almost forgotten he’d bet his horse too. “I can’t dance.”

Sif’s face is so bright and pleased that Thor almost forgets to maintain his dour expression. She knows Thor well enough to know that he’d never go back on his word. “Good! You’ll finally have some motivation to learn.”

Fandral turns to Thor and pats his back warmly. “Fear not, my friend. I shall help you.”

“You are not teaching me to dance a Quicktrot.”

“And pray, is there anyone else you could trust with this task? I am the most proficient dancer of all the lords at court.” Fandral waggles his eyebrows, “Ask any of their ladies.”

Thor rolls his eyes. “I’ll find someone.”

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“This is ridiculous,” Thor mutters, his one hand on Fandral’s hip, the other holding his hand. His face is already cherry red with embarrassment, and they’ve hardly started their lesson yet. Thor isn’t sure how he let Fandral talk him into this. If even one of those musicians lets out so much as a snigger Thor will cut their fingers off. “Shouldn’t I be practising with an actual dance instructor?”

Fandral looks appalled. “And spoil my fun?”

”This isn’t exactly what I pictured in my head when you said you were going to teach me.”

“What? Am I not - ” Fandral makes a kissy face, “- pretty enough a dance partner?”

Thor gives him a playful shove and Fandral grins.

“I am only trying to help you. Or do you wish to trip over your own feet, go careening into the dessert table? That would be just as amusing for Sif, I am sure. I’m just trying to spare you the humiliation.”

“You -” Thor points a finger at Fandral’s chest, “Might be worse than I am.”

Fandral makes a mock-offended face. “And you, my friend, are simply an impossible student. It’s not my fault your feet are as heavy as Mjolnir.”

Thor tilts his head up. “I’m a warrior.”

“So am I. So is Sif. Now put your hand on my hip. From the top -”

“I am not doing this!” Thor exclaims, extricating his hand from Fandral’s. “You insist on leading. *I* am leading. I’m the King of Asgard!”

“King of Asgard? You don’t say.”

Thor shoots him a look, and Fandral chuckles.

“I *was* teaching you to lead.”

“You started by letting me lead and you switched halfway through!”

“No!” Fandral says defensively. He pauses, a thoughtful look crossing his face. “Wait. Maybe.”

Thor throws his hands up in exasperation. “I don’t know why I let you talk me into this. Why I let *Sif* talk me into this. All I wanted was to spend the evening drinking my fill. In peace. And instead I let myself be subjected to this nonsense - ”

“Maybe we’re approaching this the wrong way.” Fandral strokes his prim little beard in consideration. “It’s not that I *can’t* teach you, it’s just that I can’t do it while partnering you. What we need,” Fandral pauses, no doubt for dramatic effect, “Is backup.”

“Excellent. Expose my humiliation to yet more parties.”

Fandral crosses his arms in front of his chest. “You wish to let Sif down? Renege on your word?”

Thor sighs. No, he does not want to do either of those things. There isn’t much he wouldn’t do for Sif.

“Well, what do you suggest?”

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“Right,” Fandral says, positioning Loki just so. Thor’s hand feels clammy on Loki’s hip and he doesn’t know why.

“This is ridiculous,” Thor mutters.

“Now, now,” Fandral says, so bright and chipper Thor’s jaw clenches. “Loki was kind enough to come and help us, the least we can do is be amiable.”

“I can think of no worse punishment,” Thor says sourly.

Fandral turns to Loki. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Not at all, my lords,” Loki responds, smiling shyly. “It is my pleasure to be of service.”

“See? He loves it. Now. Put your hand here -” Fandral adjusts Thor’s hand accordingly. “On the small of his back. He’ll hold your shoulder. Like this.”

Thor swallows nervously. This is so*, so stupid* and he doesn’t know why he doesn’t just send for a proper dance instructor and a chorus girl.

“You have to hold him closer than that, come on.” Fandral squeezes them together, so that they’re almost chest to chest. “He’s not your brother.”

Thor’s face might be getting redder. “That isn’t how we did it before. We didn’t stand so close.”

Fandral makes a face like this is the most absurd proposition he’d ever heard. “And have you fall madly in lust with me? You have trouble enough focusing as it is.”

“This is ridiculous,” Thor repeats under his breath, but does as instructed nonetheless.

“Alright, from the top.” Fandral claps his hands to get the musicians’ attention, undeterred as ever by Thor’s pissy mood. “Remember, this is a five-four rhythm you must hold the second count. Otherwise you’ll lose your step. The two counts for two beats. One, Two-oo, three four. One, two-oo three four. See? Then it’s little different from a Volta.”

“Oh, that makes it so much clearer."

“Just get your bearings and we can elaborate on the footwork later. One two-oo three four. Don’t worry about Loki, he’ll follow your lead. *O King of Asgard.*”

Thor narrows his eyes at Fandral, but softens when he turns his attention back to Loki. Loki smiles encouragingly, looking up at him through his eyelashes, and Thor’s irritation is tempered somewhat. Still, doesn’t mean that he has to like this.

“And remember to start on the right foot. Ready?”

“I suppose.”

The musicians begin and Thor takes his first few shaky steps. He feels cumbersome, like a great hulking cave bear trained to do a circus trick: inelegant and ungainly. Thor stops and starts so many times, jerking Loki around like a ragdoll. The count is odd, the steps unfamiliar. Loki follows Thor’s halting, wooden motions as best as he’s able, but he can’t avoid getting trampled by Thor’s wayward feet.

“Ah,” Loki winces after Thor accidentally delivers a kick to his shin.

Thor’s face goes pinker and he immediately stops, huffing in frustration. “I can’t do this.”

“Don’t look at your feet,” Fandral instructs. “Look at Loki.”

“I’m stepping all over him!”

“Trust me, it’ll be easier if you don’t look at your feet. Look at his face, it’s a much better view. You’re thinking too hard on it. Just let your body move with the beat. And remember: *alternate* your steps. You keep beginning with your right foot; that’s where you keep getting lost. Alternate. Always.”

Thor makes an annoyed muttering noise. He feels so, *so* ridiculous - not a sentiment he is used to - and he doesn’t like it.

“I look like a fool.”

“You’re doing much better than before,” Fandral encourages, bypassing Thor’s statement, which only irritates Thor further. The scowl on his face gives Fandral pause.

“Once more, friend,” Fandral says, more carefully than before. He clearly senses Thor is moments away from storming off - an apt assumption. “Shall we try not looking at your feet?”

“I hurt him,” Thor says, gesturing to Loki, half hoping Loki will agree so Thor will have an excuse to adjourn.

To Thor’s relief and annoyance, Loki shakes his head. Upon his face is nothing but sweetness.

“I am good to continue, Majesty.”

Thor grumbles his displeasure, but eventually concedes. It *is* hard to refuse that face.

“Fine.” he says. “Once more.”

The music begins and Thor tries again, attempting to look less at his feet this time. He tries not to think too hard on the movements, for as soon as he becomes too self-aware he loses his step. He’s supremely conscious of Loki’s hand on his shoulder, like a great heavy iron, although in truth Loki can’t be holding him that tightly. Why this bothers him so much, he doesn’t know; he’s already had Loki in every possible manner and position. Loki’s not even disrobed and Thor is flustered.

Loki looks up at him suddenly, holding Thor’s gaze with a confidence so few of Thor’s subjects dare exhibit. Thor, unused to prolonged eye contact, briefly loses himself. Loki’s eye colour is unusual, a shade of blueish-green in this light. Like seafoam, or jade. Crystalline like shattered glass.

Thor trips over his boots and curses. When he looks up, Loki is grinning at him like he knows what he’s just precipitated. But Thor can’t outright accuse Loki of trying to distract him lest he out himself as having been *lost in Loki’s eyes.* To admit to such a cliché would be excruciating. Sometimes, Thor swears, Loki’s trying to bewitch him.

“Oh, norns,” Fandral sighs. “Allow me.”

Fandral saunters towards them and cuts in, approaching Loki and tossing his cape theatrically over his shoulder.

“May I have this dance?” Fandral oozes, taking Loki’s hand in his and bowing, the way he does when he’s wooing some maid. “For instructional purposes,” he adds, adopting his normal voice to speak to Thor.

Loki glances at Thor briefly, eyebrows high on his face, his hand perched in Fandral’s. Although Thor doesn’t like where this is going, he grudgingly nods his assent. It might indeed help him to actually see what this ridiculous dance looks like when performed correctly. And if he doesn’t learn it, all this mortification would have been for nothing.

Permission thus obtained, Loki turns back to Fandral, and makes a small, polite curtsy. “My lord.”

Fandral then takes Loki in his arms, holding him the way Thor had just done, and calls for music. It grates on Thor to admit that yes, Fandral is a superb dancer. Always has been. And in his fashion, Fandral whirls Loki around the floor, covering vast swaths of ground as effortlessly as if they were both gliding on a sheet of ice. Fandral doesn't look at his feet. Rather, he’s looking right into Loki’s face and saying something, although Thor can’t make out what. Loki says something back, a broad smile on his face. It’s like Thor isn’t even there.

The music slows abruptly and Fandral dips Loki, low to the ground, one hand on his back. Loki is evidently delighted, and lets out a surprised squeal of laughter - a sound Thor’s never heard Loki make before. Thor’s simmering blood then starts to boil.

“Alright that’s enough,” Thor says, more growl-like than he’d intended. He storms over and rips Loki out of Fandral’s embrace, one hand firmly on Loki’s bicep.

“Come now, we were just getting started!” Fandral protests, his voice breathless and airy from the exertion. He’s putting on a false veneer of innocence, but Thor can see a hint of a smirk there, and Thor’s hands involuntarily clench into fists. “I was about to show you how to -”

“I said that’s *enough!”*

Thor's booming voice surprises even him. It echoes off the walls and renders the room completely silent. Thor purses his lips, and he knows he must look utterly transparent.

"We're done for today," he says evenly, gripping Loki tighter.

"Yes, of course," Fandral says with a slight bow of the head. He smiles, an appeasing, conciliatory gesture, but he also looks rattled by the intensity Thor's response. Fandral knows better than to press when Thor gets in a mood. "Well done today, my lord. A good start."

Thor nods in acknowledgement, but it's a token gesture, for he's altogether done with this nonsense. Thor offers no other response, not even a farewell, before he unceremoniously drags Loki away and into his private rooms. He slams the door behind them.

Thor expects Loki to be cowed by his temper - this being the sensible reaction - but instead of fear, sees only amusement on Loki's face.

"No more lessons with Fandral," Thor states authoritatively, squaring his shoulders for good measure. He hopes to look appropriately intimidating, but Loki isn't even fazed.

Loki smiles wryly. "Are you…jealous, my lord?"

"I can't abide show-offs."

Loki's face lights up in delight. "You are!"

"Maybe so," Thor growls, disliking Loki's flippant air. He grabs Loki by the back of the neck and is satisfied when that teasing smile melts off Loki's face. "I don't like other men touching my things."

"You know I belong to you," Loki replies, unafraid, looking up at Thor through his eyelashes. That same look again; Thor is disarmed momentarily before he realizes what Loki is doing. Bewitching him. Loki has the audacity to laugh.

"Why would I want anyone else when I already lie in the King of Asgard's bed?"

“Why, indeed.”

“I belong to you,” Loki slithers his hand down to cup at Thor’s now-interested cock. “And this belongs to me.”

Thor lets out a small rumble in his chest. He had been set on being annoyed, but he supposes he’ll bend to allow this distraction.

“You belong to me,” Thor agrees. Even though Loki has been in his possession for some time, saying it aloud still thrills him. Loki is his, and Thor will let no one will take him away.

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“I can teach you,” Loki offers, some time later, when he’s helping Thor dress for the evening’s dinner. “We can practise together. If you’d prefer.”

Thor cocks an eyebrow. “Had you ever danced a quicktrot before this day?”

Loki shakes his head, a small, pleased smile on his face, and resumes lacing Thor’s ceremonial vambraces.

Thor clicks his tongue, impressed. “A quick study.”

Loki just shrugs without looking up - a modest gesture, but there’s more than enough self-satisfaction in his features too. He’s perfectly aware of his own skill.

“I’ve seen it before. In Vanaheim. It’s quite popular there.”

Loki helps Thor into his armor next, having become quite adept at dressing Thor after having to disrobe him so many times. Thor watches him carefully, his eyes drawn to those pink, swollen lips.

“You dare to take on such a challenge, from one as graceless as I…”

Loki peeks up, his eyebrow just barely quirked. “Would your Majesty prefer to suffer under Lord Fandral’s tutelage?”

“I’ve had more than my fill of his overly-perfumed arse.” He gives Loki’s ass an appreciate thwack. “And not nearly enough of yours.”

Loki laughs, breathy. “I will have to take care to sate you before our lessons. Else I fear we shall accomplish nothing.”

“Oh, you could never sate me, pet,” Thor takes Loki’s chin and tilts it up with his fingers. When next he speaks, his voice is thoughtful, quiet. “I don’t know that I’ll ever get my fill of you.”

Thor falls silent, He’d surprised himself by the confession; it’s unlike him to be so sincere. Loki merely stares back, eyes wide and unreadable. Thor clears his throat and releases Loki’s chin. He holds out his arm for Loki to finish his work tying his vambrace laces.

“Let me sleep with you tonight.” Loki asks quietly.

Thor says nothing; the first time he’d let Loki sleep with him was a mistake; the second and third time too, and the time after that. It is in poor taste for a king to rut his slaves in the grandeur of his own bed; an insult to whoever Thor will take as a queen. Thor has secondary rooms and bedchambers for tysts. Or, failing that, any couch or table would do.

“You need to sleep in your own bed,” Thor says, not unkindly.

“I don’t like it there,” Loki presses, his mouth set in a stubborn, unhappy line. Softly, he adds, “They all hate me.”

Thor sighs. He knows exactly whom Loki is referring - the concubines who’d been cast aside when Thor took Loki as his favourite. Thor has no trouble believing it, either. They can be quite cutthroat when slighted.

“Not tonight,” Thor says at length, because he hasn’t the heart to say no. Given Loki’s behaviour these last few weeks, Thor prepares himself to have to put his foot down on the matter. Loki’s been challenging him more and more lately, and it’s Thor’s own fault for giving in as much as he has. Thor knows he’s going to have to lay down the law at some point. It won’t do to have a slave be so uppity.

But to Thor’s surprise, Loki merely nods. His head droops, dejected, and that’s quite possibly worse then open defiance.

“Yes, my lord,” he is all he says; and no more words pass between them.

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It becomes routine for Thor to summon Loki after lunch for practise before afternoon council. Loki is a patient teacher, and Thor appreciates the delicacy with which he approaches Thor’s instruction. Thor is easily frustrated, and on more than one occasion he storms off, cursing at himself for ever having made this wager in the first place. But he returns, day after day, for yet more practise. Loki makes no mention of Thor’s temper tantrums, and carries on exactly where they left off before, for which Thor is secretly grateful. Thor knows he can be difficult. He doesn’t need anyone point it out.

After a week or so of this, Thor begins to see noticeable improvement. He doesn’t stumble over his feet like he used to, and his movements feel more fluid than they were before. He progresses so much that Loki begins to show him embellishments, little lifts and turns, and eventually, the dip.

“Here - hold me here.”

Loki leans into Thor’s hand, testing the give. “I’ll fall backwards and you’ll guide me down.”

Loki lets himself sag into Thor’s palm and Thor relents, taking Loki’s weight easily and easing him backwards.

“Lower!” Loki demands, his face bright. Thor obeys, but still Loki is not satisfied, for he issues the same command again, and Thor bends him lower until his hair grazes the floor.

“Just like that,” Loki says, breathless. Their faces are so close their foreheads almost touch, and Thor has to blink several times to keep himself from going cross-eyed. “Now bring me up again.”

They practise this a few more times, with Loki turning into Thor’s hold, and Thor guiding him down with ever increasing sureness. Thor thrills in the way Loki so eagerly flings himself backwards, trusting in Thor to catch him before he hits the ground.

“Aren’t you afraid I’ll drop you?” Thor teases as he brings Loki back to his feet. “After how clumsy I’ve shown myself to be?”

“You won’t,” Loki answers, with such assuredness and sincerity that Thor is given pause.

“It’s possible.” Thor prods. “Dash your pretty head on the floor.”

“You won’t.” Loki says again, lacing his fingers with Thor’s. He closes the space between them, so that he and Thor are chest to chest. Loki nestles his head on Thor’s shoulder, and Thor feels his breath hot against the skin of his neck. It feels more like an upright embrace than anything else. “I trust you.”

Loki hums a strange tune to himself and rocks to and fro. Thor, rather helplessly, allows it.

“Use your hands,” Loki breathes into Thor’s ear, bringing Thor’s hands down to his waist. “Tell me how you want me to move.”

“Maybe I should just fuck you,” Thor says huskily.

“Mmm, not yet,” Loki says, his lips curling in a knowing smile. “First, move with me.”

Thor does, gripping Loki by the hips and swiveling them from side to side. Loki’s body yeilds fluidly under Thor’s ministrations, malleable like clay, undulating and serpentine. Thor’s head is swimming, and it’s getting harder and harder to think.

Loki turns around so they’re chest to back, tilting his head back to expose his long elegant neck. His eyes are closed and he’s still humming to himself, still moving, and Thor is lost, mesmerized,

and Loki must know it.

The shift in Loki's demeanor has become more and more obvious of late; Thor's attention and favor has evidently gone to his head. Where once Loki had been deferential in Thor's presence, now, he carries himself with haughtiness, supremely confident of Thor's indulgence. It is Thor's own fault for spoiling him. Thor delights in procuring fine gifts for Loki: jewels, clothing, furs, sweets. He does not correct Loki when Loki fails to address him by his proper titles, although Thor knows he probably should. Loki is….well…interesting when he's unafraid to talk back. He's surprisingly clever for a slave, and more learned than Thor first gave him credit for. Little wonder that he spends so much time reading while Thor is otherwise occupied.

Loki's also got quite the penchant for mischief, as it turns out. How very convenient it is, then, that his magical arsenal is so well suited for pranks! The first time, Loki transformed the brown of Heurig's wig into a rather whimsical rainbow of swirling, animated colours, thus rendering it impossible for Thor to focus on anything the poor man was saying. Then there was that time Loki turned Heurig's wine into a cupful of live ants. Thor had to scold Loki for that one, although he'd been laughing then too, so he doubts whether Loki was even marginally chastised. Poor, poor Heurig. Thor doesn't know what the poor bastard did to make himself Loki's target of choice, but he isn't particularly hard-pressed to get Loki to stop.

When Loki belonged to Odin, Thor found such brattiness insufferable. Now, it's like Thor is actively cultivating Loki's bad behaviour. But can he really blame himself? Decent entertainment is hard to come by. And besides, Thor is sure the stress-relief is doing him good. It's to the point where Thor questions why he ever specifically sought out meekness in his lovers. Everyone else just seems so….dull in comparison.

Thor uses his grip on Loki's hips to press his arse more firmly against Thor's growing erection. Loki makes a small breathy noise that goes right to Thor's cock, a sound Thor is sure is strictly for his own benefit.

"I think you're trying to get me hard," Thor murmurs into Loki's ear. "I think you're teasing me."

Loki merely grinds his arse backwards, laughing lightly when Thor groans. Thor's fingers skim up Loki's thighs to bunch up his hem, impatient, but Loki stops him.

Loki turns his head over his shoulder to look at Thor. "Let me sleep with you tonight."

"Loki…"

“Please,” Loki pleads. “I’ve been good, haven’t I? Taught you as best as I was able?”

Thor flips Loki around to face him, set on scolding him for his impudence. He expects Loki to be cowed, but what he finds instead is something akin to a upset pout on Loki’s face. Thor’s irritation instantly dissipates into exasperation.

“Bor’s beard,” Thor groans.

“You have not for over a fortnight,” Loki says, his brows knotted. “Have I displeased you in some way?”

“No,” Thor sighs. “You please me well enough.”

“Then why? Your bed is much too large for just one person. It makes for such a lonely night. Don’t you like it?” He leans in close to kiss at Thor’s jaw, “Because I do.”

“Norns, you can whine,” Thor mutters, but sinks into Loki’s kisses anyway, tilting his head to the side to expose more bare skin. Whatever objection he had on the matter is deteriorating at an exponential rate; Loki’s his body so warm against Thor’s own, so inviting….. “Mmph, *fine*. Tonight. But *only* tonight, you hear me? Do not for a moment think that this will become a routine occurrence.” He pulls away and points a finger at Loki’s nose. “Just because you make that face does not mean your every whim will be granted. Oh yes, Loki. You think I hadn’t noticed? I know you believe you can get your way by pouting your lip and making those eyes at me. But I am your king, I will not be swayed by such childish antics. When I issue an order it is not to be questioned. My word is final.” He gives Loki a very gentle yet firm shake, as if to drive the point home. “Is that clear?”

Loki widens his eyes innocently and nods. “Crystal.”

***

Thor wakes up next to Loki every day for the rest of the week. He has to admit: it is convenient having Loki in bed next to him come morning. Thor always wakes hard, and it is far easier to simply shuffle himself in behind Loki than to summon someone else to come slake his lust.

Loki sleeps curled in on his side, his hair a tangle on the pillow, his pale skin a flawless porcelain canvas. Despite the nightly fucking Thor gives him, Loki is often restless, shifting ever so slightly underneath Thor's arm. By sunrise, however, he's exhausted himself, his dark eyelashes fanning out upon his cheeks, still save for the steady rise and fall of his chest.

It's lazy mornings like these that Thor looks his fill, sweeping an errant lock of black hair away from Loki's forehead. In sleep, the sharpness of his features is softened, and he looks young. Fragile, even. Like his bones would snap under Thor's hands if he gripped him too hard. Something warm blossoms in his chest alongside the lust beginning to pool in his belly.

Thor tugs the sheet down Loki's body until Loki's naked flesh is bared to him. Thor smooths a hand down his flank, careful not to wake him. Loki's skin prickles into gooseflesh, from either the morning chill or from Thor's touch. Thor flicks at a rosy nipple too, because he can, and delights when the nub hardens under his fingertips. Loki makes a sleepy, kittenish noise when Thor grips a fistful of his arse, pulling it open to reveal the rosy-pink lips and his sweet little hole. It makes Thor's already-hard cock ache in anticipation, and a bead of pre-cum pearls at his slit.

"Loki," Thor says, sing-song, his voice gruff as it always is in the morning. He rubs the head of his cock along the length of Loki's lips, delighting in the lingering wetness there from the night before. He gives no other warning before penetrating him in one smooth thrust.

Loki gasps aloud, jolted awake by the intrusion but unable to squirm out from underneath Thor's arm. After the initial shock of it, Loki sighs, his eyelids drooping closed once more, his head falling back onto the pillow. Thor holds him close begins to thrust lazily, enjoying how much tighter Loki is when he's on his side with his legs closed like this.

"Mmmph," is all Loki manages to say, his mouth falling open. His hips roll onto Thor's cock unconsciously. "Is this how you intend on waking me every morning?"

"It was your wish to sleep with me, was it not?"

Loki makes an airy noise in the affirmative, and Thor noses at the back of his neck.

"Then tell me you love it."

"I love it," Loki moans softly, arching his back to urge Thor deeper. Pleased, Thor gives his arse a few solid thwacks in reward and fucks him harder.

Although the angle is good, their position is not providing Thor with enough leverage to climax. But such a thing is easy enough to remedy. Thor maneuvers Loki onto his stomach, and Loki yields to Thor's manhandling without resistance. Once Loki is settled on his stomach, Thor props himself up between Loki's spread thighs. Thor greatly enjoys this position, with Loki prone form arrayed enticingly beneath him. Thor is better able to chase his pleasure this way.

Thor pauses before re-entering Loki, taking a moment to grab a fistful of his arse and pull his cheeks apart. He is once again treated to the sensual view of Loki's plump little cunt lips, and the sweet, tempting furl of his other hole. Thor wets his thumb in his mouth and rubs Loki's arsehole, moving in small, soothing circles over the puckered flesh.

"My lord…?" Loki says.

Thor makes a hushing noise and presses in. For a moment, he's more distracted by the hot pull of muscle around his thumb then he is by the promise of Loki's velvety cunt. How tight that muscle will grip his cock..!

Thor considers doing it right here, right now. His father's prized virgin runtling, utterly debauched. In Odin's own bed, no less. Loki would love it, too. Thor knows it. He might resist at first, but in the same breath he'd beg Thor for more.

"Thor...?"

Loki's voice is faraway, and the word does not even register. Thor comes-to, the haze of arousal lifting somewhat. Loki is looking over his shoulder at him warily, the muscles of his back tense. Thor gets ahold of himself. If he were to do it, he'd make sure Loki would like it. He would take care not to hurt him. Thor has known several slaves who have come to enjoy the act, male and female both. All it requires is a little extra preparation. Thor will have to put some oil aside for just that purpose.

In the meantime, Thor slips his thumb out and angles his cock back inside Loki's slick cunt. Sinking inside him is pure bliss; Thor's vision whites out at the feel of it. He comes not long after, groaning Loki's name in reverence.

***

So Thor enjoys Loki's company. So what? He's king, he can do what he likes. If he wishes to unwind with his favourite concubine than who is to stop him?

Thor tells himself this as he barges in on Loki one afternoon for the singular purpose of playing hooky.

"We are not practising today," Thor announces, tossing an article of clothing to Loki, who had erstwhile been curled up in one of Thor's plush armchairs reading. "Put these on. Come with me."

Loki makes a perplexed face and holds up the pair of trousers Thor had flung at him.

"I need fresh air. I am going riding." Thor announces. "And you are coming with me."

Loki's face alights. "Truly?"

"I think I am well enough prepared for SIf's party that we can forgo today's lesson," Thor says. "Don't you agree?"

Loki's mouth opens, clearly trying to think up a tactful response, but Thor merely laughs.

"Quickly, before I change my mind," Thor says, jovial, and watches in amusement as Loki scrambles to obey. Although Thor has already seen Loki naked plenty of times, Loki for some reason still feels the need to change behind a decorative screen. Thor isn't sure if this is because Loki is still clinging to some sense of modesty, or because he knows the painted paper screen is almost transparent when the afternoon sunlight shines through *just so*. Thor settles on the latter, since Loki never misses an opportunity to make Thor's life as sexually frustrated as possible.

Loki's shadowy silhouette undoes the laces on his shift in such a slow, showy manner it could not be construed as anything but deliberate. Thor would scream at him to get on with it if he weren't enjoying it so much.

"Might I ask what brought this on?" Loki calls. His shifts slips to the floor, revealing his long, lean, nude profile. "If it would not be too forward of me to do so…"

“You may. I bore of council. So tiresome and stuffy. If I did not take time to clear my head I’d go mad.”

“Anything in particular troubling you?”

Thor lets out a long sigh. “There are always grave matters to attend to. I would rather not elucidate.”

Loki peeks his head out from behind the screen. “You know I am always willing to lend an ear. If that would help.”

“Oh, pet,” Thor grins lasciviously, “You are always more than *helpful*.”

Loki dresses himself in the clothes he’d been brought, and emerges some moments later fully clothed. He is resplendent even in a simple white riding tunic and tan trousers.

Thor gives him a once-over and nods in approval. “They fit. Come along.”

***

Riding has always been one of Thor’s great joys: the wind in his hair, the speed, the freedom. It was always the best way for him to vent his pent-up frustrations. Something about it just seems so primal, so simple. The way things ought to be.

And, with Loki warm at his back, Thor’s worries seem very far away indeed. They travel with great speed to nowhere in particular; Loki seems thrilled to simply be there, with Thor, enjoying the lovely late summer weather. He’d shown no hesitance at all to mount Thor’s steed, even though he’d assured Thor he’d never been on horseback before. From the way he’s squeezing Thor’s waist, Thor wonders if he’s anxious or merely excited, but Thor soon settles on the latter. When Thor guides his horse through a shallow stream, splashing them both with water, Loki makes the most lovely, airy little giggle.

Deeper into the forest they go, further and further away from all Thor’s worries and responsibilities. He used to ride daily, before he took on the reins of power, and many long hours

were spent in the saddle after his mother passed. Although those carefree days of youth have long since ended, Thor still feels the urge to escape sometimes. He just needs space to breathe. Maybe now, with Loki by his side, he'll have an excuse to go out more often.

"There," Loki says into his ear, pointing far into the distance. "What's that?"

"The old Cathedral," Thor calls over his shoulder. "Shall we go take a closer look?"

"Yes!" comes the enthusiastic reply.

Thor spurs his horse harder towards the towering ruins. It had been many years since Thor had been there last. Time seems to have forgotten this place, and the Cathedral is as beautifully derelict and overgrown as it ever was.

Thor halts his horse just outside the Cathedral grounds. He dismounts first, then helps Loki climb off, lowering him to the ground with two hands about his waist. Thor hitches his mare to a nearby tree, and she eagerly sets about munching at the sun-kissed grasses that grow at its roots.

Loki is clearly excited when they enter the Cathedral proper; Thor can tell. And why wouldn't he be - the Cathedral is a sight to behold, older than the palace of Asgard and fashioned out of magnificent sparkling bluish granite. Part of the ceiling had collapsed long ago, and where sunlight falls greenery has begun to sprout. A few large oak trees reach towards the exposed patches of sky; their gnarled roots work to dislodge the ancient inlaid stone floor and return it to earth.

"I confess I know little about the Cathedral's history," Thor says, "But I do know this was a place to worship the higher gods, back before my grandfather was king, even." He runs his hand fondly over the smooth, weather-beaten stone. "So many of the old ways are lost."

Loki looks around in wonder, eyes bright and wide, as if he can't take in his surroundings fast enough. "It's beautiful," he says, wandering further inside.

Thor makes an affirmative noise as he trails behind Loki, his stare heavy on Loki's back. He isn't used to seeing Loki in plain brown trousers and boots, but Thor decides he likes the look of it: relaxed and at ease. "I used to come here as a lad. Lady Sif and I spent many a golden summer day exploring this place and learning its secrets." Thor smiles, fond at the memory. "And hiding from our parents."

Loki flips himself around so he is walking backwards, facing Thor, a broad, almost crazy-looking grin on his face. Then, in one swift motion, executes a series of backflips, seemingly out of sheer exuberance. Loki soon rights himself, breathless and laughing and...joyful, even. Something tugs inside Thor's chest to behold it, and he knows he's laughing too.

Loki smoothes back his hair casually, like that was a perfectly normal thing to do. "You will have to bring me here more often." He grazes his fingertips over the surface of a massive stone column, then casts his gaze upwards to admire the elaborate capital far above. "I like to explore."

"As you wish."

Loki looks back at Thor like he hadn't expected him to agree so easily.

"Tomorrow?"

Thor chuckles. "When my schedule allows."

"Tomorrow," Loki says with finality, like he hadn't heard Thor at all.

Thor crosses his arms, but his tone is light. "You realize I have a kingdom to run? Council meetings to attend? Petitions to hear? Does none of that mean anything to you?"

In answer, Loki makes that outrageously put-on pouty face, the one he uses when he's trying to coax Thor into something, although this time he exaggerates it so that his lower lip is literally jutting out. Meant as a joke, no doubt; but even so, it's infuriating in its effectiveness.

Thor throws his hands up and laughs. "We'll see."

Loki drops the expression and grins, looking upwards again to take in the sight of the soaring colonnade of pointed arches. "It is nice to escape the palace for a change."

Thor is given pause at this: He wonders if Loki feels cooped up in the palace. Not so unlike Thor in that regard.

“Thank you for bringing me here,” Loki says at length, after a long silence passes between them.

“You’re welcome,” Thor answers.

“When we return tomorrow we shall have to bring a picnic,” Loki declares. "Or, I suppose, when your schedule allows.”

Thor shakes his head at Loki’s 'concession', but laughs nonetheless. He holds his hand out for Loki to come to him, but Loki stands his ground, some paces away. Then, Loki pointedly takes a step back.

“Come here,” Thor says.

“Is that an order?” Loki asks, which seems like a ridiculous question: why wouldn’t it be? But then Loki takes another step back, a mischievous smile on his face, and Thor knows, *knows*, they’re about to play another of Loki’s little games.

“You enjoy the hunt, don’t you my lord?”

“You know I do."

“They say there is no hunter as skilled as you…..”

“Oh pet,” Thor says, his eyes glinting darkly, “I am the best in all the Realms.”

“A bold claim,” Loki says idly, his gaze never straying from Thor’s. He takes yet another step back. “Do you think you could catch me?”

Thor smirks, already reaching up to unhook his red cape. It will only prove too cumbersome for the chase.

“Let me be the rabbit,” Loki goes on, “And you be the hunter.”

“Little rabbit,” Thor taunts. He lays his cape on the stony floor and shakes out his shoulders. “What happens when I catch you?"

“*If* you catch me,” Loki corrects, “I will show you something.”

“Show me what?”

“Something you will wish to see,” Loki says cryptically.

Thor cocks his eyebrow but decides not to press. To do so would only spoil the surprise. “And in the unlikely event that you should escape me?”

“I ask only to be called victor,” Loki says.

"Then we are agreed.”

Loki keeps walking backwards, inching deeper and deeper into the cathedral’s interior. He looks primed to dart if Thor made any move. Thor grins back at him, predatory.

“Thirty seconds’ head start,” Loki states.

"You think that enough to escape me, little rabbit?" Thor pouts. "I am almost insulted."

"*Ten* seconds.”

Oh, but he is a little snot sometimes. Thor nods in agreement, smirking.

Loki continues to slink backwards, a funny smile on his face. Then, in a flash, he is sprinting away, his black hair a torrent behind him.

Thor's heart races in anticipation, and he primes himself for a speedy takeoff. "One….." he counts under his breath. "Two……"

Loki is….fast. Faster than Thor expects. He's already halfway down the nave of the cathedral, heading at a lightning pace towards the interior. Beyond lie many darkened passageways and corridors in which one could hide. But Thor is heartened by the fact that Loki can't possibly have any idea where he's going. Thor knows these grounds well, and he predicts it will give him the advantage he needs to overcome his prey.

"Three," Thor says, then takes off, hot on Loki's heels, energized and exhilarated.

Some ways ahead, Loki darts into a small doorway, leading deeper into the Cathedral. Thor speeds after him, his footsteps heavy compared to Loki's near soundless ones. Thor reaches the doorway not long after Loki does, barrelling into the darkness without giving his eyes time to adjust.

The passageway splits into two directions, but luckily Thor catches a brief glimpse of movement far down the right hand side: it's Loki, turning another corner and disappearing out of sight. Thor gives chase; if he does not keep up, he could very well lose track of him. Knowing the layout of the ruins won't help him much if Loki finds a good place to hide.

Thor turns the corner, then stops suddenly. Loki is standing there, at the end of a very, very long corridor. Waiting. Waiting for Thor to catch up! Loki is teasing him, Thor realizes. Taunting him just enough to keep Thor on track. As if Thor were some kind of simpleton!

Thor makes an outraged noise, which prompts Loki to dart around the next bend. Thor gives chase, running harder, faster. When he turns the corner, he finds the resulting passageway stark and empty: Loki is nowhere in sight. Thor knows, however, that there are no more exits from this hallway - it having caved in long ago - so he figures Loki must be hiding in one of the adjacent rooms.

Thor comes to a halt, panting heavily. "Loki….." he calls, though he expects no answer. "Little rabbit…."

Carefully, Thor makes his way in the dim light, listening for any sign of Loki. It's eerie in here, and Thor can't help but feel rather exposed without Mjolnir at his side. He can only imagine how unnerved Loki must feel, small and vulnerable as he is. Well, it's his own damn fault for suggesting this game in the first place. Let him run willingly back into the safety of Thor's arms!

Thor peeks into the first room, only to find it empty save for rubble and moss. Thor frowns, squinting in the darkness. It's hard to see, but he's fairly confident none of the featureless lumps therein are Loki. He's hesitant to move deeper into the chamber, however, in case Loki takes his chance to whisk past him in the hallway outside.

The second room is little different; This place has been abandoned for centuries. There is nothing here but bare stone.

"Loki," Thor calls again, sing-song. "Are you hiding in here, pet?"

Thor makes his way towards the third room. It's getting darker, if that were possible. The Cathedral is built into the side of a hill, so although he has not descended any stairs, Thor is fairly certain he's underground. There's a noticeable chill in the air that makes Thor shiver. He really should have brought Mjolnir. What if there were Bilgesnipes nesting down here?

The third room is also caved in, having been punctured by tree roots from above. They are definitely underground, so Thor decides it would unwise to linger. The air is stale down here. Claustrophobic, even. Thor much prefers the open air of a battlefield to these dank catacombs. Up on a field of battle one can meet their enemies face to face, as is honourable; there is no sneaking around in the darkness like some coward in the night.

"Loki…." Thor calls again, but this time there's a faint note of concern in his voice that wasn't there before. If he doesn't catch sight of Loki soon, he's going to call off this silly game.

"Tho-or," comes the echo, in exactly the same singsong tone. Thor whirls around. Far behind him, towards the entrance of the hallway, Loki is wiggling his fingers at him in a semblance of a wave.

He used his magic, the little twat! There is no way he could have gotten past him otherwise. Thor lets out a mighty roar, the sound echoing down the passageway. Loki must be startled by the noise, because in a flash he's taken off back the way they came, towards the Cathedral proper. But Thor is in less of a playful mood now. He makes it his singular goal to run down Loki, even if it means chasing him to the very roots of Yggdrasil itself.

Wait. Did Loki just call Thor by name?

Thor sprints after Loki, and is quite relieved to find that Loki's leading them both back outside.

Thor's legs are beginning to burn, but still he runs harder, faster. He *has* to catch Loki. He just has to.

Loki reaches the Cathedral proper only a few moments before Thor, but Thor worries that even a slight head start would give Loki enough time to find somewhere new to hide - or worse, to magic himself invisible. By now, Thor has had enough of this game, and is beginning to get frustrated. He just wants Loki securely in his grasp again.

In the end, Thor oughtn't have worried. It takes Thor a couple of seconds to readjust to the brightness, but when he does, he has no trouble spotting Loki.

"What are you doing? Are you mad?!" Thor shouts, jogging over. Somehow, in the time since Thor had lost sight of him, Loki had climbed (*magicked himself?)* up atop the colonnade, high above Thor's head and very much out of reach. But because the Cathedral's second-level balcony has mostly caved in, only the entablature remains. In effect, Loki is tightrope-walking a very narrow beam of stone.

"Get down from there!" Thor barks. "You will break your neck!"

"I thought we were playing," Loki says innocently, taking a few careful steps, his arms out to the side for balance. Then, to Thor's horror, he does a *flip*, like a gymnast on a balance beam. It might just be the most awe-inducing sight Thor has ever seen, and yet Thor almost has to avert his eyes. His stomach is in his throat. God's above, Loki's going to give him a heart attack.

Loki lands it perfectly, of course, with nary a wobble in his step. He even has the audacity to laugh.

"Loki!"

"Do I win?" Loki taunts from high above. "Do you forfeit?"

Thor huffs, crossing his arms, not at all liking having to look up at Loki like this.

"I'm not playing anymore. You cheated; you used your magic!"

"And you did not count to ten," Loki returns, amused.

"That -" Thor sputters incredulously. “Never mind. Get down from there, lest I truly lose my temper!"

“Would you like to see a backflip? Of course, that might be trickier -”

“Don’t you dare,” Thor hisses.

“Why, my lord,” Loki bats his eyelashes. “It is almost as if you care about me.”

“Of course I care about you,” Thor snaps. The words reverberate off the stone walls and fade into an awkward silence. They stare at each other for a long while.

Thor reaches his arms out imploringly. “Come down,” he orders again, more pleading than before. “....Please.”

To Thor’s infinite relief, Loki crouches low on the beam, then lowers himself so that his legs are dangling off the edge, just above where Thor stands in wait. Gingerly, he slips his arse off and lets himself fall into Thor’s outstretched arms. Thor catches him easily with just a small *oomph,* relief flooding his system at having Loki securely in his embrace again.

“You caught me,” Loki says breathlessly, his cheeks flushed with exertion, his hair a windswept mess. He’s never looked so beautiful. "I suppose that means you won."

At that, Thor squeezes Loki hard against his chest. “Gods, but you are mad. Absolutely mad. Do you know that?”

“So you have often told me,” Loki says; his usual response when Thor tells him this. They are both still high on adrenaline, and it’s the easiest thing in the world to lie Loki on the mossy ground atop Thor’s discarded cape, with Thor’s hand protectively cradling the back of Loki’s head as he guides him down.

With Loki firmly settled on his back, Thor is able to knee apart his legs and lower himself between

them. The feel of his body beneath Thor's is so reassuring. Loki is back where he belongs.

"Did I frighten you just now, my lord?" Loki teases gently.

"No," Thor says. Then, petulant, he adds, "Yes."

"I am here, I'm not going anywhere," Loki whispers, cutting straight to the heart of it. His fingers tighten in Thor's hair. "I'll never leave you." Loki presses his forehead to Thor's, and grinds his hips up against Thor's now prominent erection. Thor humps between Loki's invitingly spread legs, wanton as a teenage boy. They both groan at the contact, and Thor shudders.

"Loki," Thor pleads. "Loki."

Loki pushes at Thor's chest until Thor backs off just enough to give him room to maneuver a bit. Loki makes quick work of the laces on Thor's breeches, reaching delicate fingers inside to palm at Thor's erection. Thor makes a throaty, guttural noise when Loki finally wraps his hand around his cock. All that excitement has left Thor antsy and brimming with unspent energy. Loki seems to sense his need and does not tarry in undoing the laces of his own trousers.

"So much less convenient than my shifts," Loki jokes, breathless, but Thor is too wound up to appreciate his attempt to lighten the mood. He merely grunts and helps Loki rip off his suede boots and trousers. Thor descends upon him at once, planting hungry, desperate kisses along his jaw and shoulder.

"Majesty," Loki moans. "My lord - umph. *Thor.* Please do it. Do it now."

Thor needs no further encouragement. He lines himself up and pierces Loki in one smooth thrust. He begins slowly, rocking into Loki's slick hole, spreading the wetness down the length of his cock.

"Ah, Loki," Thor says it like a curse and slips his hand up Loki's shirt to palm at his chest, as though Loki had breasts. After awhile he begins to thrust more violently, pumping his cock inside Loki with enough force to rock him forwards several inches each time. He is only barely lucid enough to remember not to crush Loki with his weight. His cape must offer some cushioning, but beneath that is nothing but grassy stone.

Loki is open-mouthed and panting, his black hair splayed out over Thor's cape like an inky stain. His fingers fist into Thor's own tunic, wordlessly spurring him on. Rutting so frantically, it does not take much for him to come to completion. Thor roars as he cums, pumping himself erratically into Loki's willing body, and collapses, his mind blissfully blank and his limbs boneless. He pants wetly into Loki's shoulder until slowly, he recuperates some of his faculties. Thus spent, he flops down next to Loki and gathers him into his arms. They lie there for some time, sweaty and exhausted, dozing lightly, and only waking to watch the clouds pass overhead.

"We should return to prepare for tonight," Loki says at length, peeling his head off Thor's chest. His face is dreamy and satiated, and his hair, quite charmingly, has a few leaves stuck in it.

Thor cocks his head. "Tonight?"

"For Lady Sif's party," Loki clarifies. "It's tonight, isn't it?"

"Yes," Thor says, then perhaps too bluntly, adds, "But you won't be coming."

Loki sits up. "I thought..." His brow furrows when it becomes clear Thor isn't jesting. "I thought that…"

"That I was going to dance with you?" Thor bursts out into laughter. "Oh pet. I'm dancing with Sif. Why would I dance with you? You're a - " Thor's voice trails off.

"A what?" Loki says softly, gazing down at him. "What am I?"

They stare at each other for a long while in silence. Thor's mouth opens once, twice, but nothing comes out.

At length, Loki laughs at himself. His cheeks pink, and he looks genuinely embarrassed.

"Forgive me, I was being foolish. Of course it will be with Lady Sif. I must have misunderstood."

There's a note of bitterness in his voice that gives Thor pause, but at the same time, Thor knows he hadn't mislead Loki in this. He never explicitly told Loki that they'd be dancing together. Loki

should have never assumed such a thing.

"Don't be upset," Thor says, sitting up to affectionately tuck a lock of Loki's hair behind his ear. "I very much enjoyed our lessons. I am grateful for your instruction."

Loki nods, then ducks his head away from Thor's touch. There's upset written all over his face, and Thor huffs.

"Loki," Thor warns. He doesn't appreciate having his offer of reconciliation dismissed.

Loki smiles, but it looks forced, tight. *Be happy,* Thor wants to command, but knows such an order would only sabotage itself. He can no more command Loki to be happy than he could to will a flower to bloom.

Thor sighs.

"I will make it up to you," Thor says, petting Loki's cheek and planting a light kiss there. "I promise."

***

Thor is drunk.

Very drunk.

He's in a celebratory mood, so why not?

They all thought he'd tie his feet in two trying to dance a quicktrot. Ha, ha! The look on Sif's face! Thor literally swept her off her feet. Gods above, it was all worth it, to see her so completely and utterly astonished and delighted. The wild applause and cheers he'd received mean nothing to him in comparison. Volstagg had even stopped shoveling food into his mouth to watch, and that's saying something.

“You look so surprised, friends!” Thor says cheerfully as he returns to his seat, Sif’s hand perched in his. He feels breathless and exhilarated, and is surprised at how much he’d enjoyed the experience. In truth, he’s beginning to see the appeal of this dancing business. Hel, he might even ask Sif for another turn on the dance floor. “Did you think I could not do it?”

“It’s not that we didn’t think you could do it,” Volstagg says. “It’s just that we didn’t think you’d do it like *that.”*

Thor laughs, vindicated, and settles onto his couch to feast the night away. The drink soon catches up to him though, and before long he is a grinning, happy mess, beyond pleased with how this evening had played out.

“So Loki did manage to teach you,” Fandral says.“A miracle.”

“Wait. Loki taught you?” Sif exclaims over her wine.

“Aye. Very thoroughly, I should say.”

Sif’s eyesbrows arch, clearly impressed. “Well then! Pass on my thanks; Truly that was the best birthday gift I have ever received.”

“Let me send for him.” Thor says. “He would be very pleased to know it.”

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It does not take long for his order to be obeyed, and in short order, Loki is led into the hall by two pages.

“There he is!” Thor beams. “My little dancer. C’mere.”

Loki does, approaching Thor’s couch with a small curtsy.

“You will be pleased to know that not a single toe was crushed this night! I performed with near-perfection. My lady Sif was thrilled.”

“Immensely,” Sif adds from Thor’s side. “You must be an excellent dance instructor! I am sure it was no mean task to teach him. Frankly I thought it impossible.”

Loki ducks his head. “I am very glad to hear it, my lord. My lady.”

“And we have you to thank,” Thor goes on, drawing Loki closer by tugging on his hand. Thor sits up and his head swims; for a second he sees two Lokis. “Ah, but you are a sweet thing. My sweet slave. No wonder my father was so taken with you.”

Loki is rendered visibly uncomfortable at this, but in his drunken state, Thor hardly notices. He pulls Loki in to stand between his thighs, then further still to slur drunkenly in Loki’s ear. “But you’re mine now. Aren’t you? You belong to me.”

Thor casts a quick look beyond Loki’s head. Such jealousy on the faces of Thor’s courtiers and noblemen! Ha! Thor will never tire of lording Loki over them. It’s deeply gratifying to see them openly yearn for what Thor can take at will.

“You like to be shown off, don’t you?” Thor whispers huskily. “I like to show you off too.” Thor presses a kiss to Loki’s clothed stomach and affects a pout. “Do a little dance for me?”

Loki opens his mouth to answer, but before he can make any response, Thor is already calling for music.

“Majesty, I -”

“Make them want you,” Thor interrupts. In his inebriated, lustful enthusiasm, Thor smooths his hands up Loki’s thighs, bunching up Loki’s shift almost up to his arse. He’d intended to speak softly, but the alcohol has raised his volume several decibels, and it comes out much louder than he’d anticipated. “Make them wish they could rut between your long legs as only I can.”

“*Majesty,”* Loki pleads, blushing furiously and twisting away. He scrambles to cover himself from

the invasive stares they are eliciting, and grips his hands over Thor's to keep them from wandering. Thor merely laughs, too deep in his cups to see the indignation on Loki's face.

"Just a little dance, pet. I have something for you."

Loki nods, his jaw clenched, and makes a tiny *mmph* sound when Thor thwacks his arse playfully.

The musicians are soon readied, and Loki takes his place at the center of the floor. When the music begins, so does Loki. It's a fine little dance of jumps, twirls and tumbles, with a few smoke bombs thrown in for good measure. Loki never fails to entertain. He's always so graceful, so enthralling. And yet Thor is distracted; alcohol always puts the red in his blood, and the dance has done nothing to ease the semi Thor's been sporting since he had Loki in his grasp. It's got him envisioning Loki spread beneath him, taking his cock into his tight little hole, moaning and squirming so prettily, as he always does. Thor shifts in his chair, antsy. Would his intentions be glaringly obvious if he retired so soon after Loki is dismissed?

Loki finishes with a few tumbling passes and strikes a magnificent final pose. The crowd is delighted, and Loki bows low on one knee to acknowledge their cheers. Thor grins, raising his hand to tell the crowd to settle down.

"Bravo!" Thor says once the noise has petered out. "Oh, Bravo. You just keep on astounding us, don't you? The most beautiful dancer to have ever graced these halls! I do believe a reward is in order." Thor raises his voice. "Has he not earned a reward from his King?"

The crowd roars in approval. Thor basks in it for a moment before raising his hand to call for silence again. He then waves a servant forward, who kneels and presents Loki with a small lacquered box.

"A gift," Thor announces, "For my most treasured favourite."

The servant opens the box, revealing the exquisite string of pearls Thor had selected for just this occasion. There are many admiring *oohs* from the assembled onlookers, which pleases Thor too.

Loki approaches slowly, reaching forward to delicately trace his fingertips over the beads. He looks up at Thor briefly, and Thor nods his assent:

Go on. Take it.

The room is quiet, so, so quiet. The moment drags on much longer than it should, until the atmosphere in the hall begins to sour. Thor's smile falters. Then, after glancing up at him one more time, Loki does something Thor would have never imagined*:* he turns on his heels and leaves.

It all happened so quickly Thor did not even have time to intercede. Thor can hardly even believe what he'd just witnessed. It's inconceivable for a gift from a king to be openly refused.

There's an uncomfortable burn at the back of Thor's neck, and he immediately recognizes the feeling as humiliation. Everyone is murmuring. They'd all seen it. From here, the whispers will spread like plague, becoming ugly and distorted:

The King of Asgard can't keep his whores in line.

Thor is instantly sobered. He's never been snubbed like that, and in front of his friends to boot. How dare he. How *dare* he?

"Oh dear," Amora says at his side. "He didn't like it."

Volstagg is laughing, too drunk to do otherwise. He claps Thor on the shoulder. "Trouble in paradise, eh, Thor?"

Thor rises from his seat, the low din of voices now unbearable. "Excuse me," he seethes, taking his leave, even as Sif begs him to sit back down. He approaches his head guard on the way out, hardly able to contain his fury to form coherent words. Somehow he manages, though his voice is low and dark and threatening. Thor feels electricity prickle underneath his skin.

"Bring him to me."

ha

haha

HAHAHAHAHAHAHA

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

PSA: This is the darkest chapter of the story so please heed the warnings.

Who does he think he is?

Humiliating me?

And In front of my friends, no less!

He should be grateful for the gifts, for the accommodation in the harem. How many countless others would gladly take his place?

Turbulent thoughts such as these swirl in Thor's head as he makes his way upstairs, to where he knows Loki has been made to wait for him. He's furious, moreso even than when he learned the truth of Loki's magic. Guards and servants wisely get out of his way as Thor passes, alerted to the danger by the current of static electricity in the air. They know better than to intervene when Thor is in such a state. In truth, Thor's not sure what he'll do when he comes face to face with Loki. He's too drunk to think clearly, and the wound is too fresh to even try to rein in his baser impulses. Like a lightning strike, the only way to expunge his excess energy is to release it…...

Loki startles when Thor barges in, looking up with wide eyes. He stands by the window, retracting a fingernail from his mouth like he'd just been chewing on it. He seems to shrink even more as Thor approaches. Thor remembers that frightened look from the first time Loki had crossed him, when he'd lied about his magic. This time, however, Thor isn't moved.

"What the Hel was that?" Thor demands, slamming the door behind him and storming over. "You insulted me! Openly defied me in front of my closest friends!"

Loki stands his ground when Thor draws near, but there's apprehension in his stance too, and his fingers clench harder around his robe, pulling it taut around him.

“I insulted you,” Loki echoes.

“Did my gift not please you? Not extravagant enough for you, is that it?” Thor sneers. “I swear, what these damn concubines have me do to satisfy them. I could pluck the stars from the sky and it would not be enough…..”

Loki crosses his arms more tightly around himself, and when he speaks his voice is quiet but firm. “It’s not the necklace.”

“The pearls are from Alfheim; collected and treasured by the mer-folk there,” Thor goes on stubbornly. “I assure you I paid a sizeable amount to acquire them. They are more than adequate a gift for one even as lofty as you.”

“It’s not the necklace,” Loki repeats, and the last of Thor’s patience frays away completely.

“Then what? You do this just to aggravate me?” Thor shouts right into Loki’s face. “To make me look like a fool? Why must you be so…*difficult?!”*

The last word is so sharp and biting that Loki shrinks, his eyes wide and afraid. The sight of it is enough to give Thor pause, even in his drunken state. He takes a few deep inhales to calm himself, scrubbing his hand over his face, and tries again.

“If you don’t accept this necklace I will have to make an example of you, do you know that?” Thor says lowly, more warning than threat. “When a King is so inclined to present you with a gift is an insult to refuse it. Be gracious and accept my generosity. A little gratitude would not go amiss.”

“Gratitude,” Loki says, his face twisting into an expression Thor has never seen before. “For treating me as you do? For humiliating me? At times I think - I think you must care for me, but sometimes….” Loki looks away, and when he speaks again his voice wavers. “Sometimes I swear, it seems like I mean nothing to you at all. You make me feel so....*cheap*.”

“Loki….” Thor begins, but stops short of apologizing. The King of Asgard doesn’t *apologize.* And even if he did, it certainly would not be to a slave. “Don’t be like that. Here -”

He wishes Loki would accept it so they could be done with this, because truly Thor takes no pleasure in the thought of having Loki punished. If it came to that, Thor would have no choice. He

cannot let such an obvious slight against him slide. He's already shown far too much leniency with Loki in the past. How would anyone respect him if he continued to let this slave act with such insubordination? They'll think him weak. Soft.

"Take it," Thor pleads. pulling the necklace out of his pocket and offering it with insistence. "Take it, it's yours."

But Loki makes no move to do so, so Thor simply slips it over his head for him, and clasps it closed at the back of his neck. They are truly stunning on him, gleaming in the dim light.

"See how beautiful they are on you?" Thor coaxes, as gently as he is able, although it still comes out sounding abrasive. He waits for some reaction, some expression of thanks, but when none comes, Thor's frustration mounts.

"Well?" Thor grunts.

Loki chews his lip, looking down at the pearls and thumbing at them absently.

"Thank you," Loki eventually says. It comes off as forced, empty, which only aggravates Thor further. But he hasn't really the will to fight any more about it anymore. He's tired, and drunk, and he just wants this to be over with.

"Then it is settled." Thor clears his throat and tilts his chin up to straightens to his full magisterial height. "You will wear them around court, and it will be like that - incident - never happened. But let this be a warning: I am still your master, Loki. I have shown you leniency once before, but you are wearing my patience thin. You would be wise to act within your station, and be grateful for the favour I bestow upon you."

Loki just looks away, his arms still closed tightly around himself. *Protectively*, Thor might've thought, had he not had so much to drink. Thor hates these little sour moods Loki gets in. It frustrates Thor that Loki isn't happier, *genuinely* so, especially when Thor had taken care to be so gentle with him.

Thor wishes Loki would smile at him the way he did out at the Cathedral.

"I can give you anything. Name it, it's yours," Thor says at length, when the silence becomes

unbearable. He hates himself for this, trying to appease a pouting pleasure slave, but the words spill out nonetheless. “What about a horse of your own? And.....and private riding lessons too. Would you like that? I’d give you permission to ride anywhere on the palace grounds. And the surrounding woodlands if you have an escort.” Thor thinks - there isn’t much he hasn’t already given Loki. Loki is by far his most doted on concubine; he is ever attired in the most resplendent silks and jewels. What more could Thor possibly give? “Or maybe would you like some companionship while I am away? I could get you a handmaiden, or a tutor, or….or a puppy, even. Just tell me what you want, and I will make it so.”

“What I want you won’t give me,” Loki says, so quietly he’s almost inaudible.

A knot of dread forms in Thor’s stomach. If Loki asks for his freedom, Thor already knows he will refuse.

“You liked it,” Loki accuses, finally looking up to meet Thor’s eyes. His tone is pleading, plaintive, wounded. “Kissing me, the night of your coronation. You liked it, I remember. You kissed me back.”

Thor lets out a long exhale. “Loki….”

“You want to. I know you do.” Loki tilts his head up, as if hoping Thor will indulge him. His eyes are so round, so imploring that for a moment Thor seriously considers giving in. “Maybe I want it too.”

Thor doesn't bridge the gap between them, and Loki’s face turns so…..sad.

“Tell me you didn’t like it, just tell me you didn’t like it and I’ll stop,” Loki says. “I’ll never ask it of you again. I’ll be good, I won’t question you anymore. But if you did like it - if you want to - I beg you, please, tell me, because I cannot stand not knowing.”

The truth is, that deep down, Thor *does* want to kiss him. He’s thought of it more times than he’d ever admit. He liked the feeling of being close to someone for once. But they are not equals, and it would be unwise to behave otherwise.

“Loki,” Thor sighs. “I can’t.”

“Because of what they’ll think, is that it? Because I’m Jotunn and you cannot be seen to care for me?” The wounded expression on Loki’s face intensifies, so much so that Thor finds it hard to look at him. “Or is it because you’re afraid of what you might feel for me if you do?”

Thor hardens at this, his face setting into a severe expression. It pisses Thor off that Loki’s playing him like this. Thor knows he is too difficult a man to be offered love freely. Like all those who came before, Loki has nothing but Thor’s crown in his sights. Which, erstwhile, Thor would not have minded so much. Thor is, above all, a pragmatic man. He understands the way the world works. As the King of Asgard, his love life is by definition transactional in nature; an exchange of power and wealth for sex.

It’s this *playacting* that really grates on Thor - making their relationship into something it's not. Why can’t Loki just be happy with his station? Why does he insist on demanding more than Thor is capable of giving?

Loki must know how badly Thor wants to give in, too. How pathetic. A king who yearns for the love of a slave.

“I am not your lover,” Thor says coldly. “You are not my wife.”

“I could be,” Loki whispers, his green eyes blazing and defiant.

“You are a whore.” The word sounds harsh even to his own ears.

In one smooth motion, Loki rips off the necklace, and to Thor’s utter astonishment, throws it to the ground and shatters it. The pearls scatter, a great cascade in all directions. Thor is so stunned that Loki makes it several paces before Thor grabs him again and whips him around to face him.

“We are not finished!” Thor squeezes Loki by the biceps. “I did not dismiss you. I want to *fuck*.”

“No.”

The word reverberates in Thor’s drunken mind, sobering him up somewhat. Thor blinks in disbelief, almost rendered speechless. “No?”

“No,” Loki says again, swallowing. “Not now.”

“I own you!” Thor roars, when his shock abides and he finds his voice again. “I can do with you what I like!”

“Please let me go,” Loki says.

“Does that bother you, to be reminded of your station? Does that wound your pride?” Thor sneers, giving Loki a firm shake. “A slave with pride. Will wonders never cease.”

“I know what I am,” Loki spits back. “You won’t let me forget. Good enough to dance *for* you but not *with* you. Good enough to fuck but not to kiss."

Thor is taken aback by the sudden burst of venom, and isn’t sure what to do with it. Thor can hardly believe he’d let Loki’s willfulness go unchecked for so long. He had been too indulgent, had let the boundaries between them blurr to an inappropriate degree. Thor should have never let Loki refuse him in the first place. Now Loki thinks he can get away with talking back to his master. His *king.*

“How dare you speak to me like that,” Thor growls. “Do you realize what I could have done to you when I uncovered the truth about your magic? Hmm? Or what about when my father went into sleep and left you alone and friendless? The only thing that kept you from being thrown to a brothel was *my* intervention. I showed you such mercy, you ungrateful little wretch. I saw to your pleasure when I could have had you by force. I took care not to hurt you, gave you a place in my harem. And you repay me with nothing but insolence.”

All that had transpired between them flashes before Thor’s eyes - the sweet little smiles, the playful games, the passionate lovemaking - all a ruse. Loki’s guise of sincerity only incenses Thor further. Loki doesn’t love him, and Thor resents the whole charade that led him, stupidly, to believe he did.

“I see now I have indulged you too much.” Thor says. “You forget your place. You’re the same spoiled brat my father kept like a lapdog.”

“Hit me, my lord, and be done with it.” Loki says, brazenly holding Thor’s gaze, although he’s trembling too, and Thor can tell he’s afraid. It’s a challenge more than anything else, and Thor isn’t sure what Loki means to accomplish by issuing it.

Thor cocks his head. “You think I would?”

“You could not buy me with your trinket, so perhaps beating me will get the results you seek.”

“I am not that kind of man,” is all Thor can think to say. “I am not a brute.”

“The rumors about you suggest otherwise,” Loki whispers.

Thor knows as much, although for some unplacable reason, it stings hearing it from Loki. In his youth, when he’d been trying to prove his mettle to his father, Thor might’ve even prided himself on the label. He’d certainly done enough to earn it: putting down rebellions in his father’s name, leading his men into glorious battle, crushing Asgard’s enemies under the might of Mjolnir. He’d been keen to show his strength and courage then, which oftentimes translated into…....well, brutality.

Heartless. That’s what they called him - perhaps deservedly. The whispers still ring in his ears. *Heartless Prince Thor.*

Didn’t shed a single tear for his lost mother.

Not a single tear, can you imagine?

Doesn’t he care?

He must be made of stone.

Something ugly awakens in Thor, something deep and dark and animalistic. He tightens his grip on Loki’s arm, and a low snarling noise escapes his throat. There’s a crack of thunder above them, and the prickle of electricity raises the hairs on Thor’s forearms.

“W-wait,” Loki stutters, sensing his mistake. "Master, wait -”

“Never mind,” Thor says icily. "If that's what they say, then it may as well be so."

It's nothing for Thor to rip off Loki's robe, ridding him of his protective cocoon all at once. Loki makes a startled whimper noise at the ungentle treatment, but does not resist as Thor wrenches away the fabric. He's wearing his usual white shift underneath, the one he'd danced in earlier that evening. It enrages Thor to even look upon it. Thor pulls him close and buries his face into Loki's neck, chasing the lingering scent of Loki's perfume, and decides to ignore the way Loki tenses in his embrace. He should just get rid of Loki, really; he's done away with slaves for much less. Or at the very least, Thor ought to punish him publicly. Flog him or brand him. *Mar* him. String him up outside the palace walls, so all will know what lies in store for those who dare to insult the King of Asgard.

Thor should do these things…..but he already knows he won't. Because as loathe as he is to admit it, Loki has him utterly, irretrievably, fatalistically ensnared.

"I cannot seem to slake my lust for you," Thor whines into Loki's shoulder. His breath smells acrid with alcohol even to his own nose. He rocks his half-hard cock into Loki's hip to make his need known. "No matter how many times I fuck you, I am never satiated."

At that, Thor tears off the remainder of Loki's clothes in one go. The material rips easily under Thor's bruising grip, and Thor delights in its ruin. Loki staggers when Thor does this, but Thor's grip on him is too firm for him to stumble completely. He's left nude save for a single gold armband, so perfect and beautiful Thor sometimes aches to look upon him. Loki does not object to Thor's handling, and from the look on his face it seems he's resigned himself to whatever punishment Thor intends to inflict. Thor triumphs in his submission…….for the most part. In truth, he didn't think Loki would be subdued so easily. Thor is glad for it and he isn't. Thor doesn't know what he wants.

Thor bullies Loki over a nearby table, bending him over it so that his tummy is pressed flat against the surface and his ass is in the air. Thor growls at the sight: the pretty pink of his cunt lips, the smooth alluring curve of his ass, those long, lean thighs. Thor presses up behind him, already greedy for contact. If he can't have Loki's love, he might as well have *this.*

With the hand that's not keeping Loki in place, Thor works frantically to free himself from his trousers, grunting in frustration when he fumbles with the laces. It takes a few tries but at last his cock pops out, eager for attention. Thor gives himself a few cursory strokes, though he's hard enough already. Using his thumb and forefinger he parts the fleshy lips of Loki's cunt, so enticing in its warmth and wetness, and without much more ado he angles his cockhead against the opening and *thrusts.*

The table rattles with the force of it, and Loki wails, his hands scrambling on the tabletop to try and grant himself some leverage. The clench is as exquisite as ever, and Thor's head lolls back in bliss.

He hardly gives Loki any time to adjust before he pulls halfway out and thrusts in again, coating his cock more thoroughly with Loki's juices. How very fortunate it is that Loki gets so wet, even when Thor is rough with him. Thor hadn't even done a single thing to arouse him and still he's dripping! He must like it, Thor decides, and begins to fuck him viciously for it. Loki makes the most lovely breathy noises with each pass of Thor's cock, either out of pleasure, or perhaps because Thor keeps knocking the wind out of his lungs.

Thor reaches forward to grab a fistful of that lovely raven hair, wrenching Loki's head back so that his back is arched up at an uncomfortable angle. Loki moans brokenly.

"Are you enjoying this?" he asks, his voice low, taunting even.

"Y-yes," comes the meek, breathless response, with an upwards inflection at the end, like Loki isn't sure whether this is the answer Thor is looking for.

Thor grinds his cock in deep, watching intently as Loki's features twist in response.

"And why is that?"

Loki swallows, the bob of his adam's apple made more prominent from the way his head is wrenched back.

"Because," he says, "I'm a whore."

Thor stops moving for a moment, though he doesn't release the grip on Loki's hair. This wasn't the answer Thor was expecting, but he's sure Loki said it just to placate him. And yet, the tone of Loki's voice gives Thor pause: underneath the surface lies an undercurrent of bitterness so strong it's practically *palpable.* It's subtle, but it's definitely there. Loki is fighting him, even now.

Thor makes a growling noise and issues a particularly punishing thrust, which Loki takes with only a sharp little gasp.

"Yes," he agrees. "You are."

Thor lets go of Loki's hair and Loki immediately falls forwards over the table, panting heavily. On a whim Thor pulls out, and without further fanfare repositions his cock at Loki's arsehole. The sight alone makes Thor hiss: the head of his cock so red and angry against Loki's tiny little hole, rubbing, teasing, but without the force necessary to penetrate. Loki gets his arms under him and rears up again but Thor easily holds him down, shushing him in a manner that is too sharp to be soothing. He hadn't done it like this with Loki, but he'd often fantasized about it, and he figures now is as good a time as any to indulge. Thor is still worked up from their little spat, and envisions how satisfying it will be to spread Loki in such a way.

You will do for me what I could never ask of any high-born wife of mine. Thor isn't sure if he says it or merely thinks it.

He spits at Loki's hole to ease the way a bit, and uses his thumb to work open the resisting muscle. Although Thor is still incensed, it is not his wish to injure Loki. Then again, neither does he wish that Loki *enjoy* this; such is Loki's duty to him, and Thor's to take by right. And if Loki utters a single word of protest, Thor will truly show him what it means to incite the King of Asgard's wrath.

But Loki does no such thing; he lays still and compliant, motionless save for the rapid in and out of his breathing. Thor rewards him by running a hand his flank. If Loki decides to be good Thor won't be cruel. Thor spits again, coating his cock thoroughly with wetness, though Thor thinks he's already plenty slick with Loki's own juices. Having worked Loki open somewhat, Thor retracts his thumb, and aligns his cock in its place.

The push in makes Thor see stars; he'd somehow forgotten how sweet this can be. He has enough of his wits about him to know to go slower than when he'd first fucked into Loki's cunt, but even so, his onwards press is relentless, and Thor doesn't stop until he's fully sheathed within Loki's clenching arse. Loki squirms and whines underneath him, but his abortive movements only serve to excite Thor further. Thor spreads Loki's cheeks so he can sink in just that much deeper, and is doubly rewarded by the sight of Loki's rim stretched taut around the base of his cock. He's so fucking tight like this, it's almost *too much*. Thor remembers a time when he used to fantasize about doing exactly this, back when Loki belonged to his father and was utterly beyond Thor's reach. Given how Loki flaunted himself around in those days, the fantasy often had a vengeful bent, thought in his mind Loki always ended up screaming for more.

Well, Loki is now his to do with as he pleases. Fantasy made real. The thrill of it spurs Thor on.

With Loki beginning to loosen, Thor fucks in selfishly, chasing his own pleasure, his balls tightening with the urge to come. Loki deserves this, Thor thinks to himself. For making him feel the way he does.

Thor's climax hits him like a great tidal wave, powerful and overwhelming. Pleasure courses up and down his spine and he roars, thrusting into Loki erratically as he spills inside him. It's good, better than he thought it'd be. How could it not? He got what he wanted, didn't he?

Orgasm clears the fog in Thor's mind somewhat; he takes a few deep breaths to collect himself, then pulls out with a gentleness he hadn't exhibited earlier that evening. Loki's hole, once so immaculate and virginal, is now puffy and red from use, and probably quite sore. A trickle of come seeps down towards his cunt - further testament to their debauchery. It's not like Thor isn't pleased with his handiwork, but even before his orgasm wears off a niggling thought begins to worm its way into his mind. Maybe he shouldn't have been so rough…..maybe he should have fetched some oil. He'd let himself get carried away. It *was* good, Thor decides, although not entirely what he expected. Loki will come to like it, in time.

Loki crumples to his knees as soon as Thor releases him. He's silent, not a single word of complaint or protest; his face a blank mask under that thick black veil of hair. He merely reaches for the remnants of his clothes and carefully gathers them against his naked chest. His hands tremble as he does so.

Thor tucks himself back in his trousers and clears his throat, an unfamiliar sinking feeling settling into his gut.

"You're to dance tomorrow night at the banquet," Thor says, business-like, as though none of that had just happened. "You know this?"

Loki nods once, holding himself tighter. He looks very small indeed.

"Right," Thor says.

And that's when Loki finally glances up at him. It's only a brief moment, but even so, the image is instantly seared into Thor's memory: Loki's eyes wet with tears that won't spill; wide with anger, hurt, fear, and above all, hatred.

The image of Frigga pops into Thor's mind. He wonders what she'd think of him now.

"I do not wish to be cruel to you." Thor blurts out, unsure of how this encounter had spiralled so far out of his control. It's the last thing he says before he finds himself hurrying out the door, towards his own private rooms, without looking back, and scattering pearls underfoot.

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It's under the dim, sickly light of a crescent moon that Loki makes his way through the ice-gardens, silent as a shadow, his footsteps light and swift. He knows the palace guards' routes by now, has studied them intently for weeks, and knows just the path to take to avoid detection. His breath is humid and foggy in front of him, but otherwise the night air is still, biting cold but windless. The perfect night for an escape, Loki thinks ironically.

It's almost too easy to reach the side gates unnoticed. Loki has only to render himself invisible to slip by the night watch. He only has so much time before Helblindi notes his absence, so Loki quickens his pace, hurrying deeper into the darkness beyond Utgard's walls.

He shakes off his invisibility as a dark figure materializes in front of him.

"Loki," the figure says, sounding like he thought Loki wasn't going to show. In truth, Loki almost hadn't. But he figured he owed Ulfr the courtesy of telling him his decision face-to-face, especially since this whole thing had mostly been Loki's own idea.

Ulfr looks Loki up and down, and the relief in his voice soon fades to suspicion. He tightens his grip on his boar-steed's reins. "Where are your bags?"

"I'm….not coming with you," Loki says without preamble. It's harder to say than he thought it'd be.

"What?"

"Shhhh," Loki hisses, looking back fleetingly towards the gate he'd just passed through. He turns back to Ulfr with a frown, "There's been a change of plans. I've been…. betrothed."

“To whom?” Ulfr takes Loki by the shoulders, gripping him firmly, and bends over slightly to meet Loki’s eyes. “Who has laid claim on you, Loki?”

Loki chews the inside of his lip, not wanting to say it, but there would be no point in lying as it will be common knowledge soon enough.

“Laufey.”

Ulfr makes a snarling noise, and releases Loki from his grasp.

“Your own uncle,” Ulfr says in disgust. “Your own blood.”

Loki folds his arms around himself. “It’s not unheard of to preserve the royal bloodline." Helblindi's words in his own voice. "I hadn’t any choice -”

“Yes, I’m sure you needed much convincing.” Ulfr sneers. "The bearer of Laufey’s heirs. What your family wouldn’t do to get itself closer to the throne. I knew you wouldn’t go through with this. I am a fool for letting myself be drawn in by your lies.”

“You think I want this?” Loki spits, waving his arms in emphasis, although he’s careful to keep his voice hushed to avoid drawing attention. “To play broodmare to my own uncle? This was Helblindi’s doing; he put me under the king’s eye, whispered sweet words of promise in his ear. I had no part in it.”

“But you go along with it willingly enough.” Ulfr bears his teeth, a gesture of disdain.

Loki sighs tiredly. “This would have never worked, don’t you understand? I’d have been disowned in a heartbeat if I ran away with you. Helblindi would never release my inheritance to us. It was a mistake.” Loki’s voice goes quiet. “This was all a big mistake.”

“You gave me your word,” Ulfr says.

“I know,” Loki says.

“You led me on. You made me believe we had a future together.”

“I know.”

I thought we did, *Loki doesn’t say.*

“Loki,” Ulfr opens his arms, “Please.”

He reaches out his massive hand, and for a moment Loki is tempted to take it, Helblindi’s arrangements be damned. Loki does not love Ulfr, and he is quite sure Ulfr does not love him in return, but he has a formidable estate, and Loki does not find his company overwhelmingly disagreeable. They would be a good match…..if circumstances were anything other than they are.

Loki shakes his head. “I’m…..I’m sorry.”

A long silence passes between them. Loki had expected Ulfr to be furious, but instead Ulfr stares somewhere off in the distance, quiet.

“What if Laufey didn’t want you anymore?” Ulfr says tentatively, turning back towards Loki. “Would you come with me then?”

Loki laughs bitterly. “The arrangements have been made. I’m quite sure there is nothing we could do to derail them.”

“There is,” Ulfr says. “....If we consummated our union.”

Loki laughs outright at the outrageousness of it, then falls deathly silent when he realizes Ulfr is being quite serious.

“You’ve lost your mind,” Loki says incredulously. “You’ve lost your damn mind.”

“No, it is perfect,” Ulfr insists, a crazy gleam forming in his red eyes. “We will consummate our union right here. Now. He wouldn't have you if you had no blood-blessing to impart. I would have liked to have done it under more auspicious circumstances, but I fear this may be our only chance..... ”

“We are done,” Loki says, turning on his heels. “I’ll not entertain such preposterous notions. Farewell, Ulfr. I wish you well, but do not contact me again.”

Loki only makes it a few paces before he’s whirled around, gripped hard by his upper arms. Loki yelps in surprise, his hands flying up to shield himself, but Ulfr grabs them both. He’s stronger than Loki, taller too, and not for the first time, Loki curses himself for being so small.

“What are you doing?! Unhand me!”

“I’m saving you,” Ulfr says, like this is a completely reasonable course of action. “Or would you rather have him than me?”

Loki increases his struggles when he realizes what Ulfr intends.

“Don’t you dare,” Loki hisses. “Don’t you fucking dare -”

Ulfr grunts with the exertion of restraining Loki. “This is the only way we can be together. You will thank me for this later. Cease your struggling, Loki.”

“Are you mad?! You’ll ruin us both!”

In his thrashing, Loki manages to wriggle a hand free. He draws forth a quick blast, forcing Ulfr back several paces.The attack doesn’t subdue Ulfr as much as Loki hopes, but it does give Loki an opening, which he uses to make his escape. He flees, going back the way he came, but the sound of Ulfr’s angry roar and heavy footsteps behind him makes him panic, and Loki does the only thing he can think to do: he summons a distress flare and shoots it into the sky. So much for remaining incognito.

Loki is momentarily blinded by the sudden bright light, but it’s the incredible boom that’s more startling. In the distance, Loki hears guards shouting, having been alerted to the goings-on. It won’t be long now before someone will come to investigate.

Loki makes it little further before he's hurled to the ground, lunged at from behind. Loki lands face first on the icy ground, winded and disorientated.

“You had to make this difficult.” Ulfr growls, pressing Loki’s face into the snow. He grips Loki’s wrists behind his back to pin him in place, using his massive weight to his advantage. With his hands thus restrained, Loki can’t perform the gestures to summon another spell, so instead he redoubles his thrashing, trying vainly to buck Ulfr off. Vaguely, Loki remembers what it was like when he’d let Ulfr grope him in dark corridors and quiet corners, but only after he’d made Ulfr promise to allow him certain freedoms once they were mated. Ulfr delighted in caressing Loki’s chest, ass, thighs; he’d plead for more favours, but Loki had always refused. He'd managed to steal a kiss or two, though. His touch was gentler then, and Loki hadn’t really minded it, especially when he believed Ulfr to be his only way out -

“I’ll still have you, I swear it,” Ulfr says hoarsely, obviously still not quite recuperated from Loki's attack. His other hand is skirting up Loki’s thigh, tearing at Loki’s clothes. Despite this, his voice is still somewhat calm, even. “Properly, on a bed of white rabbit-furs, as though you were still intact. It pains me to do this, but there isn’t time -”

“Stop,” Loki shouts. “Ulfr!”

Ulfr makes a hushing noise and pries Loki's legs further apart.

"Laufey will have your head for this," Loki tries, in a last ditch effort to stop this. ".....And mine."

There’s a long pause then, the only sound their jagged pants. Loki waits because there’s nothing else he can do, his heartbeat in his ears, his every breath laboured with Ulfr’s heavy weight atop him.

Voices echo in the distance, closer now, and Loki begins to think he might make it through this unscathed. Oh, Helblindi will have his hide, that’s to be expected, but Loki will be preserved in the way that matters most.

Then, abruptly, Ulfr’s fingers shove deeper, seeking entrance. Loki squirms to try and dislodge them, but to no avail. Immediately he feels an uncomfortable, painful pop, like something had ruptured inside him. Loki cries out, but his voice is weak, strained.

“You bastard,” Loki sobs, as a warm trickle begins to seep down his thighs. “You sick bastard.”

“Send for me, when the time is right. I’ll still have you. I give you my word.” Ulfr says hurriedly into Loki’s ear, and retracts the violating fingers. “And I assure you, unlike some, I keep mine.”

At that, a great weight is lifted off his back, and Ulfr is gone, disappearing into the night upon his great boar-steed.

Loki peels himself off the ice and rolls over onto his back. He wipes at his eyes, expecting there to be more tears, but in truth he feels strangely calm, like a great burden has been lifted from his shoulders. He doesn’t have to look down to know there’s blood there - the blood Laufey would have demanded on their first night, as tradition dictates. Numbly, Loki thinks it a terrible waste to have his prize maidenhead popped in such a unceremonious, inelegant fashion. Not even in a proper hall, tch.

The first guards arrive shortly thereafter, accompanied by Helblindi, who must have been alerted to Loki’s whereabouts by his distress flare. His ever vigilant, ever dutiful brother. The one time Loki had actually managed to escape from underneath his watchful eyes and this is what he gets.

Helblindi stops abruptly at the sight of Loki’s prone form in the snow. Realization soon dawns on him, his face turning a shade of grayish blue. Loki merely lies there, exhausted beyond reckoning and unwilling even to move.

“Loki,” Helblindi whispers, “What have you done?”

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Loki fiddles with the hem of his dance costume, picking at a stray thread, and frowning when he accidentally unravels part of the seam. There isn’t time to fix it, so Loki just lets it be, and instead peeks out from behind the curtain into the assembled crowds beyond. There’s a decent amount of courtiers present, although nowhere near the crowd that had been at the coronation. Thor is there too, up on his royal dias, speaking to a blonde woman - Amora, probably, although Loki can’t

really tell for sure from his vantage point. This banquet is for the Ambassadors from Vanaheim, with whom Amora is related. Loki makes a distasteful face.

“Are you alright?” A chorus girl asks him, and Loki turns towards her.

“I’m fine.” he says, not bothering to put in the effort to make it convincing. Loki feels sluggish and he knows he probably looks it too. He hadn’t slept the night before - too many memories swirling in his mind, granting him no rest. His head throbs with weariness, and he can feel it behind his eyeballs. How he’s expected to put on a decent performance in his current state, he doesn’t know. He didn’t think Thor would still make him perform after what happened last night.

The girl casts him another pitying glance. “You’re shaking- ”

“I said I’m *fine!”*

Loki is taken aback by the sharpness in his own voice. He’s on edge, clearly, having already snapped at the woman who’d dressed his hair earlier that day. The girl shuffles off with what sounds like a mumbled curse.

Loki huffs, turning back around to peer out the curtains. He’ll be on next, after those acrobats. He watches them without really seeing and fidgets with his restrung pearl necklace. They weren’t able to retrieve all of the pearls, so the necklace is shorter than it used to be. For some reason Loki finds this perversely satisfying.

It had been a gamble, refusing Thor’s gift like that. Loki hadn’t really thought it through at the time; his wounded pride had driven him to do it more than anything else. And for a moment, it was worth it to see the baffled look on Thor’s face. But more than that, Loki did it to send a message. A high consort would not tolerate being groped at in public; why should he? Loki knew he’d never become Thor’s confidante if he could not demand his respect. He’d thought to train Thor how to treat him. Ha! How well it went.

Loki wishes he’d forced himself to eat earlier that day, although he'd been hard-pressed to summon any appetite. He feels lightheaded now, and hardly has the energy to put on a performance. Nonetheless, he takes the floor at the centre of the court when he is cued, positions himself, and angles his nose in the air. In his head he’d imagined himself strutting out onto the floor and staring defiantly into Thor’s face. But now that the moment has come, Loki simply can’t muster the will to do so.

It is Amora up there on the dias, keeping Thor company, Loki can make her out now. Loki feels sick.

You are nothing but a replaceable whore. There are a thousand more just like you waiting to take your place.

Loki begins his dance when the music begins. He starts slow, building momentum when the drums pick up in rhythm. Loki tries to hide the wince at the way his movements exacerbate the dull ache in his backside - a not-so-subtle reminder of just how little Thor regards him. Loki doesn't know what he expected. He *is* just a slave, after all; why wouldn't Thor fuck him like one?

Was the experience of it any more humiliating than all those times Thor had forced himself upon Loki, pried his legs apart and took his pleasure without any care for Loki's wellbeing? Or those times Thor had simply ordered Loki upon his cock as he reclined lazily, while Loki rode him to completion? Perhaps not; from the start, sex with Thor was hardly a mutualistic affair. Loki never came out unscathed, even when Thor was careful with him. There were always bruises, or love marks, or other such indicators of Thor's passion on Loki's flesh. Like the storms he brings, Thor is overwhelming, his lust terrible and awesome.

Still, something about the encounter left an especially foul taste in Loki's mouth. Thor was punishing him. That's what that was. Putting him in his place. He could have done far worse, too, if he really wanted. Beaten him, or maybe even sent him back down to the Underground. Loki shivers at the thought.

It could hardly be counted as a punishment at all, given Loki's purpose in Thor's household. That's what Loki's here for, isn't it? For bringing Thor pleasure? Thor just wanted to drive the point home, in that special, *visceral* manner of his. Pfft.

Loki had been so close to breaking him too, *so close* to obtaining the kiss he's been longing for. Thor's normally stony resolve had cracked, weakened no doubt by Loki's honeysweet words and wide, wet eyes. He'd had Thor where he wanted him, vulnerable in a way Loki had never seen before. Loki needed that kiss. Not only for what it would mean for his mission, but….just because. It feels important, somehow.

Then he'd gone and ruined all his progress in one fell swoop. There's no way Thor will let Loki sleep with him after this, let alone *kiss* him. Loki just had to press his luck, didn't he? He'd pushed Thor too far, demanded too much. Loki always was a risk-taker; it's what got him into trouble in the first place. Loki tries to think where it had all fallen apart, where things went so horribly awry. Trying pinpoint his mistake had served no purpose but to keep him up at night, tossing and turning, unable to find rest. Thor is just too bloody unpredictable. Perhaps Loki was destined for failure from the beginning. Not just with regards to Thor, but with his whole damned mission. He was

probably doomed the very wretched moment he was born.

Amora is saying something to Thor, leaning in close to whisper in his ear. Loki only gets a brief glimpse up to the dais but he's pretty sure that's what he saw. Thor is turned towards her, listening intently. Is Thor even watching?

He probably kisses her on the mouth, Loki thinks. *And I'm just the whore he likes to fuck in the ass.*

Loki knows he isn't going to make the tumbling pass before he even lands it. He can tell by the way his body is positioned in the air; he's done this enough times to know that he's crooked, and his feet aren't where they're supposed to be. Loki's adrenaline spikes at the realization that yes, he isn't going to make it. He's going to fall. In front of everyone. In front of Thor.

The actual event of it is still a shock, even though Loki braces himself for it. No pain registers, at first; it all happens so fast Loki's mind has to take several moments to catch up to the signals his body is sending. The sudden inertia is what strikes Loki first: where only a second before he had been leaping and somersaulting, now, he lays in a crumpled heap in the middle of the floor. His head spins; he feels dizzy and disoriented, like he's in the process of waking from an exceptionally bad dream. Next comes the shooting pain up his leg, catapulting him into grim reality. Loki cries out and writhes on the ground. The pain sears like nothing else Loki's ever experienced, and Loki's eyes well with tears. It's his ankle. Probably broken, Loki thinks frantically. *Broken.*

As Loki becomes more and more lucid what next becomes apparent to him is the silence in the hall. The musicians have stopped, and all around him the crowd murmurs: an ominous all-surrounding din. Loki knows he can't get up and so he lays there, resigned, his neck burning with humiliation. The only thing he can really do is hide his face so the entire court won't see him cry. He can't believe he let himself fall. He *never* falls. Hysterically, Loki envisions Angrboda looming over him, shaking his head in disappointment.

"He's hurt!" Someone shouts in the distance. *"Send for a healer!"*

"Are you alright?" a girl asks in a funny accent, her hair a riot of blonde curls about her head. She is crouching over him, but he's only just noticed her now.

Loki blinks up at her, and a stream of tears leaks down his temples.

“My ankle….” Loki moans.

“Don’t move,” She smoothes her hand over his hair. “Don’t move.”

Others are gathering around him, mainly other dancing girls and performers, but also a few attendants too. Loki hates this, having them all come to witness his humiliation. Loki contemplates rendering himself invisible, but even so, he’d have no way of getting himself off the floor unassisted. He lets the blonde girl cradle his head, even though he’s not at all comforted by the gesture.

In his haze, he hardly even notices the small throng of onlookers being parted, and Thor suddenly appears, standing so, so much taller than the rest. Thor reaches down towards him, and -

Loki recoils with an intensity that surprises even himself. It’s an instinctive reaction, heightened by the adrenaline still coursing through his veins. His body jerks in the girl’s grasp, away from Thor’s looming figure. He can’t help it. Thor is intimidating, sometimes.

Around him, the female attendants stare up at Thor, their eyes wide, knowing.There are rumors about the king, after all, and Loki knows many of them aren’t so nice. The blonde girl holds Loki just a tad tighter, and everything goes deathly quiet.

Thor immediately straightens, his eyes shifting to and fro, visibly uncomfortable under their scrutiny. His cheeks pink, and if Loki didn’t know any better he’d say Thor was flustered.

“Right,” Thor says, clearing his throat. He quickly composes himself, and when he speaks again, it’s in his usual, commanding tone. “Send for a Healer. My *best* healer. Loki has been injured.”

“Majesty,” they all reply in unison. No one has yet to move.

Thor’s face goes even redder. “Well, what are you waiting for?! He’s hurt!” Thor snarls, setting everyone in motion. There’s a flurry of activity around him, but it’s hard for Loki to focus on anything or anyone in particular. His body feels so heavy. His eyelids sink closed, but not before Loki catches a glimpse of his foot jutting out at an odd angle.

“Up you come,” one attendant says gently, threading his arms underneath Loki’s neck to help scoop him off the floor. It hurts to move, and Loki whimpers.

“Careful with him,” Thor interjects, his voice sounding more and more distant, muffled, like he’s speaking through a wall. “He is an inmate of my harem…….”

Loki winces when he’s set on his good foot, and he knows for certain he’d topple over were it not for the two attendants holding him up. Nausea hits him all at once, and he squeezes his eyes shut against the sensation. It’s better than acknowledging the onlooking crowds, whose murmurs still echo in the hall. When Loki blinks his eyes open again he the room is positively spinning. His knees feel weak.The pain is unbearable.

I really should have eaten today, is the last thing Loki thinks before his body goes limp and his world goes black.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> thank you to all my commenters and cheerleaders who kept me motivated during my long absences <3 love you all! hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Loki knew the mages would be thorough, but not this *thorough.*

“You’re not going to cry, are you,” Helblindi says from the doorway, his nose crinkling.

Loki can’t even summon a retort; he’s speechless, unable to pull himself away from the sight in front of him. The face in the mirror simply isn’t his. Loki prods at his cheeks where his heritage lines once were, the skin there now alabaster instead of a deep azure blue. He looks so….so……Aesir. Loki supposes his features are essentially the same as they were before - the same sharp cheekbones, straight nose, high brow - and yet, his face is that of a stranger. Loki has become unrecognizable, even to himself. His kind identify each other by the raised ridges on their skin - their heritage lines - and without them, Loki feels like a blank slate. The creature in the mirror is has no past, no ancestry, no kin, no relations, no identity. His freshly-minted green eyes stare back at him, wide and frightened.

Loki has never felt so unmoored. He’s as an anchorless ship, lost amidst turbulent seas.

“I don’t look like me,” Loki says at length, still fixated on the reflection in front of him.

“That’s the point,” Helblindi says. “You will be safer, disguised thusly."

Loki’s eyes flit down. It was one thing to agree to this mission….quite another to put it into action. Given how outrageous this whole thing is, Loki hadn’t expected it to ever come to fruition. And especially not so soon - only a month has passed since Helblindi first informed him of his plan and this day, when two seidr-wielders had come to erase Loki's selfhood. Somehow Helblindi found a contact in Vanaheim - a lord by the name of Grandl - who, by some incredible stroke of luck, was both due to host the Allfather and *amenable to a bit of extra Jotun gold. Loki doesn’t know how much money Helblindi spent to bribe Loki’s way in, but he’s sure it was substantial.*

The whole thing is absurd. Impossible.

“I can’t do this,” Loki whispers.

“You must,” comes Helblindi’s flat reply. He comes up behind Loki and rests a massive hand upon his shoulder. “The arrangements have been made, your passage to Vanaheim secured. We may never have this chance again.You agreed."

"I know," Loki says bitterly, though he's not sure why he ever did. Loki supposes that the prospect of taking control of his own destiny - even in this foolhardy, reckless way - had proven too tempting to pass up. Loki has been in limbo for the last ten years. He was starting to think Helblindi had abandoned him with Angrboda……which may not have been the worst thing, when Loki thinks about it. When Helblindi had come to collect him after so long in exile, Loki expected it was because he'd finally selected a mate for him. Indeed, there was one suitor - a lord thrice Loki’s age, the governor of the northernmost lands in Jotunheim. Loki heard that the isolation had driven him a bit mad. The ice fields surrounding his fortress are so impenetrable hardly any Jotunn dare to venture there.

The lord was willing to overlook Loki’s tainted past and forfeited dowry……for a different sort of price. Heirs. Several heirs. Ten at least, as so few younglings survive to adulthood at the best of times, let alone in such a harsh, inhospitable environment. Loki would spend the rest of his fruitful years pregnant to meet that quota. And if something went wrong during his pregnancy or labour, there would likely be no seidr-healers present to alleviate his suffering. The thought of labouring to bring forth children under such circumstances filled Loki’s heart with despair. Loki would surely die up there on the wastelands - of infection, or boredom, or misery. Anything would be better than that.

Nothing in Loki’s life has ever been of his own making. Embarking on this mission could not be called freedom by any stretch of the imagination, but at least it offered some possibility…..

"I know you are afraid," Helblindi says, oozing a gentleness that is anything but genuine. He pets Loki’s hair, but his touch makes Loki's skin crawl, "You'd be a fool if you weren’t. But remember why we are doing this."

Loki swallows, his throat becoming uncomfortably tight. He hates the way Helblindi says it - loftily, like it’s some grand sacrifice on behalf of their people. Let him not forget what Loki’s motivations are.

"I never want to see or hear from you,” Loki says lowly through his teeth. “I want you to release

my inheritance to me. I want my estate. And I tell you now I would die happy if I never had to look upon your cursed face again."

At this, Helblindi ceases his ministrations, but doesn't pull away completely. If he is surprised by the intensity of Loki's venom he certainly doesn't show it. He stares back at Loki blankly through the mirror, then finally removes his fingers from Loki's hair.

"You have my word," is all he says.

Loki clenches his jaw, forcing himself to look.upon his pale-faced reflection. It is done, it is settled. He will either succeed in this, or die trying. As it stands, there is nothing left for him in Jotunheim.

"Then, my brother," Loki says, spitting the word off his tongue, "I will find you your Casket."

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Loki is having one of those dreams again.

He knows it's a dream because he knows he's not asleep. Not completely, anyway. His rest is fitful, as it often is. Bad memories, like dust, can never be swept away completely. All it takes is a little turbulence to send them into a flurry again. They get everywhere, memories do. Into little nooks and crannies where they think they can't be seen. Building up over time. Layer upon layer. His blue skin stained white with it.

Loki tosses about in his bed, whimpering softly. Something is off. He's being watched. Is this part of the dream too? Loki can't be sure. He wills his eyes to open. His heart begins to race when he realizes it isn't a dream. There is someone in the room with him, a dark, massive figure looming over his prone body.

In a fit of panic, Loki scrambles backwards so fast he smacks the back of his head against the far wall. The resulting pain makes him see stars, but also brings him to complete lucidity. The assailant moves forward slightly, enough so that a beam of moonlight illuminates half his face.

“Peace, Loki,” Thor whispers, sounding slightly alarmed. He crouches down between Loki’s legs. “It’s just me.”

He rests his hand on Loki’s shin and strokes it as if he means to calm him, but it is a wasted effort. Knowing it’s Thor does nothing to lessen Loki’s anxiety. Loki breathes heavily, skittish, though he does not attempt to move away from Thor’s touch. There is no point in trying to evade it. Even if he could escape this place, he would not get far on one good foot.

There’s a long moment when they simply stare at each other in the darkness; neither willing to speak first.

“I do want to kiss you," Thor says at last.

Thor hooks his arms under his thighs and gently tugs Loki towards him. Loki yelps, but only out of surprise, for Thor had taken great care not to pain his ankle. Thor rests himself between Loki’s bare legs - Loki had never taken to wearing sleep-clothes - though now, Loki wishes he had worn *something* to bed. Lying here exposed under Thor’s gaze is making him feel very vulnerable indeed. Thor himself is wearing little more than sleep pants and an open, silken robe. His hair is a tangled mess, and Loki wonders fleetingly if he too has had trouble sleeping this night.

Loki props himself on his elbows, and peers down at Thor in bewilderment.

“What are -” Loki croaks, but the words die on his tongue the moment Thor dips his head down and licks a stripe up Loki’s lips.

“*Ah,”* Loki gasps, his head lolling back as a spasm of white-hot pleasure courses up his spine. His fingers tighten in the bedsheets, and he instinctively grinds up to meet that wet, slippery pressure.

This seems to have been the reaction Thor was looking for, because he does it again - though not before first peeking up at Loki and shooting him a slight smile. And then he does it again, growing bolder with each pass of his tongue. And then again. Loki squirms, muffling his cries into his palm so as not to alert his harem neighbours to the goings-on. Thor’s tongue is warm and soft, devious in its machinations, and Loki has never felt anything like this before. Though he’d sometimes daydreamed about what this might feel like, having heard of such lewd acts from older, more worldly Jotun, he certainly would have never imagined that Thor would perform it. And even if he did, Loki can’t fathom him ever doing it for a slave.

Emboldened, Thor begins to lick him in earnest, his beard prickling Loki's sensitized flesh. Using one hand to stroke Loki's hard cock, the other to keep a firm hold on his thigh, Thor picks up the pace, lapping into Loki with more fervour than before. His kisses become deeper, sloppier as he dips down between Loki's lips to suckle at the delicate flesh within. He's so eager and enthusiastic Loki can't help but think Thor is enjoying this too.

"T-Thor," Loki squeaks, rolling his hips against Thor's open mouth and sinful tongue. This feels like a fever dream, hot and hazy, made more surreal by the fact that it's Thor doing this, *Thor,* the god-king of Asgard, his master, his enemy -

Loki moans aloud when Thor laps at his opening, daring even to prod at it with the tip of his tongue. Loki writhes, unable to keep his fingers from knotting themselves into Thor's golden hair. He just needs to keep Thor *there,* right there, where he needs it most.

Thor stops stroking Loki's cock, and Loki whines at the loss. But Thor does not leave him wanting for long, and instead buries two fingers into Loki's wet entrance, curling them in a way he knows Loki likes. Loki moans at the sensation, his toes curling on either side of Thor's head. Without any further ado, Thor fuses his mouth back onto the seam of Loki's cunt, laving it with his tongue over and over at an almost punishing pace, for truly Thor is a man not known for his tenderness. It's almost *too much,* and still, Loki's fingers clutch tighter in Thor's hair in a wordless plea for more. Thor responds eagerly, redoubling his efforts with the singular goal of making Loki come.

"Please," Loki all but sobs, for he can feel the warmth building in the bottom of his belly, and indeed Loki knows he's on the verge of climax. When it finally crashes over him, Loki cries out, unable to muffle himself any longer. Loki sees stars behind his eyes. The pleasure is unrelenting, and Thor does not stop until Loki is spent, wrung out and oversensitive. Loki collapses back into his mattress, panting and dazed, and not altogether sure whether he's still dreaming or not.

Having accomplished his task, Thor sheds the remainder of his clothes and climbs up between Loki's wantonly splayed legs until his head is level with Loki's. Though he is still reeling from his orgasm, Loki can tell Thor's cock is hard. He feels it against his thigh, indomitable as ever, and very much in need of attention. He'll be wanting his release too, Loki knows. Thor breathes heavily, his hair an unkempt mess where Loki had been gripping it, a dewy sheen of sweat upon his brow. But there is also an uncharacteristic *neediness* about him that catches Loki off guard: it's in his eyes, silently pleading, as if seeking Loki's assent. Loki's never seen him like this before. If Loki had more of his wits about him he would have thought to exploit it somehow. It's not like Thor to be so open.

But in this moment, Loki has not a mind for scheming. Instead, he sees in himself the same level of desperation.

Please, Loki's not sure if he says it or just thinks it. His hands reach for Thor, pulling him closer. His eyes water with how badly he needs it. Loki doesn't think he could take it if Thor refuses him now. Loki is a hair's breadth away from crumbling completely -

Thor closes the distance between them and kisses him, at last.

It should feel like success - just another small victory bringing Loki closer to his ultimate goal; one more way Loki has shown Thor to be a sentimental fool, easily manipulated, swallowing every lie Loki has spoonfed him. It *should* be the culmination of everything Loki's been working towards since Odin fell into sleep, his moment of triumph. Proof that not even the King of Asgard is impervious to his charms.

That's what he thought it would be like, anyway.

But now that it's happening, Loki feels none of these things. All he knows is the warmth of Thor's mouth against his own, deeply fulfilling in a way Loki didn't think it would be. It's as though they are finally meeting each other halfway, coming together for the first time ever.

Gratefully, Loki wraps his arms around Thor's neck to keep him close, and lets out a quiet sob into Thor's mouth. He can taste himself on Thor's lips, the tangy musk of it unmistakable. Loki chases the taste with his tongue, further deepening the kiss. He coaxes Thor's lips apart and hesitantly touches Thor's tongue with his own, which Thor allows without any fuss. It feels good to do this without having Thor try to wrest control from him. Thor is receptive, for once; he seems content to let Loki set the pace and guide him.

What it feels like is...comfort. Like a balm to allay the deep longing in Loki's chest.

Thor adjusts himself and enters Loki in one swift, smooth thrust, causing them both to gasp. The initial stretch of Thor's cock always comes as a surprise, usually because Loki is never quite prepared enough to take it. Thor is, above all, an impatient lover. Though he likes for Loki to enjoy their coupling, Thor has never held any compunctions about taking what he wants, regardless of Loki's own desires or wishes. That he's held off on his own pleasure for so long, long enough to provide Loki with an orgasm first, is quite unprecedented.

Loki is more than adequately prepared tonight, however. He's dripping with readiness. Thor draws out, then in again, coating his cock with Loki's ample slick, and begins to fuck him in slow, even strokes. The dual sensations of being filled and being kissed is almost more than Loki can take. Thor never really cared for this position much before, probably because it affords the kind of intimacy that a king would not usually extend to a slave. Usually Loki is fucked from behind,

pressed up against some piece of furniture or another, his clothes hiked up around his waist. Other times, Loki is made to service Thor as he reclines leisurely, with his mouth or with his cunt, as Thor directs. If Thor is feeling generous, Loki is allowed to come. But often Thor has neither the time nor the patience to trouble himself to that end. He's a king, after all, and has far more important dealings to attend to. Early in their relationship Loki resigned himself to be grateful for any pleasure Thor deigned to grant him. Not having Thor brutalize him was blessing enough.

Well, no more - Loki swears that after this, if Thor wants to fuck, he'll have to make sure to see to Loki's pleasure. And kiss him, too.

This close, Loki can take stock of the little nuances of expression that flit over Thor's face. He is a handsome man, Loki must admit. Loki drags him down for yet another kiss, and is rewarded when Thor surges forward to return it with just as much enthusiasm, though he knocks his nose against Loki's in his haste. He's clumsy, and bitey too. For all that Thor enjoys a good fuck, he doesn't seem to have been kissed all that much in his life. It dawns on Loki that this is probably the only sexual act in which Loki is more experienced.

From the way Thor's hips are beginning to stutter in their rhythm Loki knows he's on the brink of climax. Loki clenches his inner muscles around him to hasten Thor's pleasure, and is rewarded when Thor makes a raspy noise and spills deep inside, burying his face into the crook of Loki's neck. Thor pumps himself half-heartedly into Loki a few more times to ride out the rest of his orgasm, then goes limp as a deboned fish. He's clammy with sweat atop Loki, and altogether much too heavy for Loki's slim frame. Before Thor peels himself away, he cocks his head to seek out one more kiss, which Loki happily grants. This one is much more subdued than the kisses that came before, tempered by Thor's orgasm, though no less sweet. Thor's beard is starting to chafe at Loki's skin, but Loki hardly pays it any mind. He's *done it* - secured Thor's kiss at last.

At length, Thor pulls out of Loki and settles at Loki's side. His eyes droop, and he scrubs a hand over his face, sweeping his sweat-soaked hair off his temples. They shift around until they're both comfortable, with Loki nuzzled underneath one of Thor's arms and Thor on his back.

The cell falls into silence, but even after all that has transpired, the mood is not altogether relaxed. Neither has forgotten their last encounter, and neither knows exactly how to broach the subject. There is so much Loki wants to say, to ask, to demand, but he's afraid to jeopardize the tenuous, unspoken truce they've just come to. So he lays there, chewing his lip, his head buzzing, still rather stunned about the sudden turn of events. Loki is not yet sure what this kiss will mean for his future, but at least now he can be reasonably certain that not all hope for him is lost.

"Your brother, I'd bring you his head," Thor says into the darkness.

Of all the things Loki had envisioned Thor might say, this was certainly not one of them. The idea

of it is so ridiculous that Loki struggles not to laugh.

Loki curls his head to look up at Thor. “What? Why?”

“Because he sold you into slavery,” Thor says solemnly. “Because he was your family and he betrayed you.”

Loki laughs, wistful. ”You would, would you?”

“If it would make you happy.”

“Were it not for him I would have never met you," Loki points out.

“Yes.” Thor agrees, and falls silent once more.

Thor may be somewhat opaque at times, but Loki knows him well enough to deduce that this is his idea of an apology. A roundabout, convoluted one, perhaps - Thor’s way of acknowledging that being in his possession has not come without suffering on Loki’s part - but an apology nonetheless. Thor *would* solve all his problems by bashing someone’s head in with his hammer.

“I’m sure I have no kin left,” Loki says, “But thank you for the offer.”

Thor nods slightly, his mouth pressed in a firm line. He clears his throat, shifting in place as he does so. If Loki didn’t know any better he’d say Thor was twitchy.

“How is your foot?” Thor asks, unsure, like he’s trying to speak delicately to Loki but isn’t quite sure how. He seems young all of a sudden; boyish even. Sheepishness does not sit naturally upon his face.

“It hurts,” Loki sniffs, petulant. But it's true; his ankle aches all the time, even with the painkilling teas and herbs they'd given him. He can't go anywhere without his crutches, and even so, it's at a snail's pace. He’s reduced to hobbling to and fro like some cripple, too proud to ask for assistance. His rivals watch him and delight in his misery.

During especially intense bouts of self pity, Loki worries he'll never dance again, that his ankle won't ever be the same. And then what good will he be? Good enough for lying upon his back, but not much else. Loki can't find any fault in the healers Thor sent him, though, so he says, “Healer Fjora is very knowledgable and gentle, she has taken very good care of me.”

Thor nods, his face grim. “It will be like it was never broken, I promise. I will do everything in my power to see you well again."

Despite all that has happened between them, Loki knows Thor means it. And Loki is simply too tired be angry, so he laces his fingers with Thor’s: a gesture Odin always used to like.

“Thank you,” Loki says sincerely.

Thor clears his throat. “Strange you cannot heal yourself.”

“It doesn’t really work like that. I’m too used to my own magic. Immune to it. But that same phenomenon is what keeps you from being fried by your own lightning.”

Thor's lips twitch upwards at the visual, then he turns somber once more.

“I always envied healers,” Thor says thoughtfully. “My magic - It’s - hard for me to control. Especially when I am without Mjolnir to channel it.”

“You’re very powerful," Loki agrees. "I sensed it in you right away. At times I touched you and I felt - “ Loki pauses, uncertain whether he should reveal this about himself, “Like my magic was drawn to yours. Calling out to you. Is that absurd?”

Thor shakes his head immediately. “No.” he says solemnly. “No, I don’t think that’s absurd at all.”

Loki smiles softly. It’s validating to hear Thor say so, without any hint of mockery or sarcasm for once. Loki resents how much he’d had to downplay his magic since he’d been discovered as a witch, making himself out to be something of a circus pony with an amusing (if somewhat mischievous) repertoire of tricks. But there is true magickal strength in him, Loki knows it, just as he senses the raw elemental power in Thor.

“Would you show me your rabbit again?”

Loki blinks out of his reverie, turning to look at Thor.

“The rabbit,” Thor repeats, “I should like to see it again.”

Loki appreciates that Thor frames it as a request rather than an order, though he is not overly thrilled at the prospect. Revealing one’s totem is an intimate gesture, not performed lightly, and Loki regrets having done it for Thor when he did. But he’d made that choice under great duress, so he tries not to fault himself too much for it. Loki can’t think of a reason to refuse Thor now. Not after the moments they’d shared this night.

Loki executes the gestures needed to perform the summoning spell; they are as familiar and as practised to him as tying his laces. The air between his fingers becomes thick and hazy, turning milky white, then iridescent. The formless smoke condenses, takes shape, and soon his rabbit materializes, gaining weight and mass, until at last it comes to rest on Loki’s chest. It sniffs Loki in greeting, clearly pleased to see its patron, though its exuberance is much tempered by the company Loki is keeping. Much like Loki himself, his rabbit is never completely at ease in Thor’s presence. Playfully, Loki picks it up and extends his arms, holding it high above his head, as he used to do when he was a youngling.

"What is it?" Thor asks, clearly awed.

Loki sets the rabbit back down on his chest and fondly pats its flank. "It's my totem. All seidr-wielding Jotun have them. They can be all sorts of creatures - boars, eagles, foxes, and the like - they are supposed to represent something about you."

"And yours is a rabbit."

Obviously, Loki wants to snark. But instead he pets his totem's ears and says, "Yes."

“Beautiful,” Thor says reverently, his eyes flit up to meet Loki’s. He smiles, his eyes crinkling, and a heavy pleasant weight settles in Loki’s stomach. "What does a rabbit represent?"

"Speed, agility," Loki answers, "Cunning, some might even say. It’s small so it must rely on its wits. But it's also related to illusion magic: a rabbit can render itself practically invisible by camouflaging against the snow."

There is more than a little irony in the fact that rabbits also change colour to match the seasons, shedding their white fur in favour of brown during the short summers.

It's because they are prey animals, Loki's mind supplies. *Just like I am.*

“It’s…..an extension of me,” Loki goes on. “It feels as I feel. ”

The rabbit burrows deep against Loki’s chest, as though it could render itself invisible if it just kept still enough. Thor watches it carefully, his face open and inquisitive. Loki wonders idly what Thor's totem would be, if he had one.

Thor reaches out to touch it, but the rabbit wriggles away, kicking its paws out in distress until Thor retracts his hand. Loki hushes it until it calms again.

“It’s afraid of me.” Thor says flatly, like he’s both disappointed but not surprised.

“Yes," Loki concedes, for it would be futile to claim otherwise.

Thor squints at him in the darkness. “Are you afraid of me?”

“Yes,” Loki whispers. “Sometimes. Not always.”

“I hurt you,” Thor states matter-of-factly.

Loki falls silent at this. The truth weighs heavy on them both: Yes, Thor had hurt Loki. They both know it, it would do no good to elucidate.

“Not always,” Loki repeats at length.

Thor laughs bitterly. “Everyone is afraid of me.”

“It doesn’t always have to be so.” Loki dissipates his rabbit into wispy silvery smoke, though he immediately misses its comforting presence. "What if," Loki begins, turning towards Thor, "You be….*Thor*.…and I be Loki.”

Loki says the name with great caution, knowing full well the fine line he walks, calling the King by name. But Thor does not object, so Loki continues.

“What if,” Loki steels himself, “You were just….*you,* when we’re together." Loki rests his hand on Thor’s chest. “You. *Thor.* Your true self. The man underneath the titles.Then I would not have to be afraid."

Thor makes a skeptical face, “And pretend I am not your king and master?”

“*Yes,”* Loki insists. “Forgo all pomp and ceremony, those empty gestures of deference. Talk to me, as you would a friend.”

“About what?”

“Anything,” Loki says. “If you have troubles -”

“And you’d give me advice, would you?”

The way he says it is sharp, almost *mocking,* even. Loki’s not sure whether he meant it to sting as much as it does.

“I wouldn’t presume to give advice to a king.” Loki says softly. “Sometimes it’s good just to have someone to listen. I know that was a comfort for your father, to have someone to listen.”

“The man you knew was not my father,” Thor says icily.

Thor looks away, crossing his arms over his chest, and Loki's mouth immediately snaps shut. The conversation, it seems, is over. Whatever easygoing companionship they'd shared just moments before has given way to fresh tension, and Loki kicks himself at his mistake. Thor has never reacted well to the mention of his father.

If Loki didn't know any better, he'd swear there was a note of jealousy in Thor's voice. Loki wonders if the affection Odin had showered upon him is what soured Thor to him in the first place. Loki knows Thor despised him in the beginning - a hatred rooted in lust and envy. For the longest time Loki had thought Thor was jealous of Odin. Loki had not stopped to think whether Thor was jealous of *him.*

Loki can't think of anything to say, and so the small harem cell falls into an uncomfortable silence. They lay side by side, strangers once more, an immeasurable distance between them.

At length, Thor closes his eyes and sighs. His arms relax at his sides.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"*This."* Thor waves his hand emphatically. "Acting like - like you care about me."

"Even a king needs a shoulder to lean on," Loki answers, rather dumbly, but Thor's lips only curl into a sneer.

"I'm not a fool, Loki. I know I'm a difficult man, and demanding." He speaks heatedly, although his eyes are firmly fixed on the ceiling above. "I have been….ungentle with you in the past. You're only being sweet to me for my favour and I'd prefer if you didn't pretend otherwise. You would run out that door in a heartbeat if you knew no guard would stop you. You'd run far, far away from me and never look back. And I - " He grimaces, "I wouldn't blame you."

"I could vanish and disappear. I've done it before," Loki offers. "I could run if I wanted."

"And if you did," Thor says, anger creeping into his voice, "I'd hunt you down, to the ends of the known worlds and back, because that's the kind of man I am. So stop pretending like - like you love me, because I know you don't."

“I choose to stay here. With you.” Loki says.

Thor lets out a long, drawn out sigh. He finally meets Loki’s eyes, and the look there is so tired, so weary. When he speaks, the single word seems heavy on his lips: “Why?”

His eyes are pleading, like he hopes desperately Loki will give him the assurance he seeks.

“Because there’s good in you." Loki says softly."I saw it in your father and I see it in you.”

Thor scowls and looks away. “I’m nothing like him. And I’m nothing like my mother either.”

“I don’t know about that,” Loki says, rolling over to trace his fingertips down the slope of Thor’s profile. “You have her nose.”

Thor laughs a bit, albeit sadly, and doesn’t bat away Loki’s hand like he expects. This is the first he’s been able to recall Queen Frigga’s memory without sending Thor into a rage, so Loki considers it progress.

Loki’s fingers quest lower, over Thor’s lips, grazing all the way down to his chin.

“It is a pleasing face,” Loki concludes.

“Ah, I see, you stay because you find me handsome? Excuse enough I suppose.”

Then a melancholy air befalls him, and he sighs again, closing his eyes.

“You don’t believe me, do you,” Loki says flatly.

“No,” Thor says. “I don’t.”`

But I want to, is what's left unspoken.

"Believe this, then." Loki says, shifting tactics. "I bet you've been told *I love you* by every bedmate you've had since you were old enough to fuck. I *don't* love you, Thor Odinson. In fact, when I first came to Asgard, I *despised* you. Is that truth enough for you?" Loki pauses to gauge Thor's reaction, and is darkly pleased at the look of utter speechlessness on his face. His eyes are almost comically wide, his eyebrows high on his forehead. It is deeply, deeply satisfying to tell him these things, so Loki goes on: "I think you're a spoilt, stubborn, arrogant princeling, with the temper of a bull, and an ego to match. Difficult doesn't *begin* to describe how you are sometimes."

Then Loki softens, tenderly sweeping a stray lock of Thor's hair away from his face. There have been bad times, no question about that, but Loki cannot forget the way Thor's laugh becomes uninhibited when he forgets himself, nor the way he sometimes looks at Loki. And Loki must be a fool for clinging to those fleeting moments like some lovelorn youth... "But I also believe that you are a good man, deep down; I think you want to be a just and merciful ruler. And….I do think you care for me. Otherwise you would not be here. Am I right?" Loki asks quietly.

"

Thor stares at him a good long while, unblinking. But rather than make any acknowledgement, he turns away once more, sighing deeply. Loki could smack him out of frustration. Here he is trying to bridge the gap between them, but Thor continues to push himself away…!.

Loki's lips curl into a frown.

"Maybe you wouldn't be so lonely if you let people get close."

This, it seems, strikes a nerve. In one smooth motion, Thor rolls on top of him, pinning Loki down. For a moment, Loki panics, the memories of their last fateful encounter still fresh in his mind.

"I don't need your pity," Thor spits.

Loki swallows hard, fighting the urge to cower. "Then take my comfort instead."

Loki lifts his lips to meet Thor's, tentatively pressing a kiss there. Thor watches him carefully, but does not pull away when first Loki kisses him first on the corner of his lips, then full on the mouth. Loki begins lightly, easing him into the sensation. Though Thor is hesitant at first, he soon opens up to it, and kisses Loki back greedily, like he's hungry - *starved* for it. He chases Loki's mouth when Loki sinks his head back on the pillow, a clash of lips and tongue, all desperation and no

finesse.

Thor’s grip on him loosens somewhat, and Loki uses the opening to rear up, coaxing Thor onto his back with a steady palm to Thor’s chest. Careful not to aggravate his ankle, Loki reverses their positions, so that Thor is lying flat and Loki is straddling his hips. Thor’s mouth is bitten, open; his expression almost dazed, golden hair splayed about the pillow. He’s also becoming hard again, and Loki worries this encounter will devolve into sex before he has a chance to speak his peace.

“Let me make you a deal,” Loki says, breathless, willing his voice to be firm. “I want you to name me your consort.”

Thor snorts lightly, disbelieving. But then he realizes Loki isn’t joking and his smile falters. “Why would I consent to such a thing?”

“Because I’m offering more than just…..*company*,” Loki says, the word sitting uncomfortably on his tongue. “I’m offering you something I think you’ve been seeking all your life.”

“And what’s that?” Thor asks tiredly. “Love?”

“I don’t know,” Loki snaps, defensive. “Maybe.”

Thor scoffs. “You’d love my crown. Nothing more.”

“And you'd love me for my body,” Loki fires back. “*Whore* that I am.”

Thor's mouth snaps shut at having that word thrown back at him. Perhaps now he will think twice before he uses such slurs against Loki.

Thus emboldened, Loki continues, “Let us have no misconceptions between us. If you want to believe that all I’m after is what your crown can offer, there is nothing I could say to convince you otherwise. So let my actions speak for themselves. I *don't* love you, Thor Odinson." Loki cocks his head, suddenly contemplative, and his voice goes very quiet, “But I could, I think. If you gave me a reason to.”

Loki uses a finger to the chin to force Thor to meet his eyes. “Give me the chance to prove to you that what I’m offering is real: one year. One year of faithfulness. Bed me and no other, and let me sleep with you every night. Let me speak to you freely when we are alone, call you by name and kiss you. Treat me with the respect and dignity befitting of the Consort of the King of Asgard. And I will lie down for you willingly. I will never refuse you. I will let you have me in whatever way you desire. And in return, I will be forthright with my affection. You will never know another night of loneliness in my embrace.”

“I can already have you,” Thor reminds him.

Loki’s voice goes low: “I don’t think you enjoyed taking me against my will as much as you claim.”

Thor’s eyes flit to one side, chastised, so Loki goes on.

“You’ll still be my King and I’ll still be bound to obey you. I will ever be your dutiful, faithful slave.” Loki emphasizes this point by placing a kiss first on Thor’s jaw, then to the corner of his lips.

“At the end of the year, if you do not feel anything for me, I will step aside for any other lovers you choose to take, and I will continue to serve you in whatever capacity you see fit. But, if you do come to love me, I want you to make me your official Consort, and let me stay by your side.”

“And should I refuse?” Thor asks. “What then?”

“Well,” Loki says thoughtfully,his confidence beginning to deflate, “Nothing, I suppose. You will continue to fuck me as you like, and have me dance as it pleases you. Eventually you’ll tire of me and another pretty thing will catch your eye. I’ll languish here in this harem cell for Gods know how long and….” Loki feels his voice begin to crack, his throat becoming uncomfortably thick, the bleakness of his future suddenly overwhelming. “You’ll forget about me, and after that, who knows what will become of me. But I must confess, I very much hope you’ll say yes because….you’re all I have.”

Hearing it out loud makes something in Loki’s brain snap. He’d been rambling, saying everything and anything he could think of to sway his target, without giving the substance of his words much contemplation. But something about those four words sets a fire alight in his mind, turning all other thoughts to ash. Loki is suddenly struck by how true it is: he is all alone in this world. All his hopes, dreams, his *future,* are all wrapped up in Thor. *Thor* - this man who is so mercurial and difficult, who would just as soon have Loki’s head on a pike as fuck him. Thor, who is selfish and

arrogant beyond measure, who is reigned by his carnal appetites and his vicious temper.

If Loki can't ascertain the location of the Casket, then what? Spend his days in this gilded prison and amuse Thor until he takes a real wife? Die lonely and forgotten, his days as a royal favourite long past?

"You're all I have." Loki says again, but this time his voice breaks completely, and to Loki's own horror, he begins to sob.

Loki covers his mouth with his hands, but quiet whimpers escape nonetheless. His body shakes with it, his throat goes tight, and Loki squeezes his eyes shut. Loki has always been so careful to keep his tears to himself, to never let anyone witness his moments of weakness. But he can no longer hold back the floodwaters. Months and months of pent-up fear and loneliness have eroded his resolve. He's tired, so tired. His ankle hurts. Not even thoughts of home bring him any consolation…...though admittedly, they never did in the first place.

Loki can't believe himself and is honestly mortified that he let slip something so private. He can't remember at what point his lies began to sound something like the truth. Maybe it was true all along.

From the way Thor goes stiff, it's apparent that he's never had a lover burst into tears on him before. He lays there, bewildered, looking more uncomfortable than Loki's ever seen him. Though Loki could not have foreseen this happening, one would think Thor would do *something,* at least - hold Loki close or kiss him....perhaps speak a few words to soothe and comfort….. But Thor does none of these things. If anything, Thor looks like he wishes he were anywhere but *here,* trapped underneath a hysterical pleasure slave.

"Well, this is embarrassing," Loki murmurs between sniffles, trying not to make his disappointment too obvious. He mops at his eyes and laughs awkwardly at himself. What seemed like such a good idea mere moments before now sounds very, *very* foolish indeed. "Forgive me. I'm making a mess of myself."

"It's alright," Thor whispers softly. It's like he's about to say something else - his mouth opens, there's a telling pause in his breath....but no. Thor must have all the empathy of a stone. Whether he's even capable of feeling anything at all, Loki doesn't know.

Dejectedly, Loki climbs off Thor and lays beside him, but doesn't nestle into Thor's side like he did before. Loki rolls over, away from Thor, and curls himself into his blanket. It's quiet between them, too quiet, the only sound Loki's occasional hiccough. As the minutes ebb away, the stillness

becomes more and more unbearable, like a great weight laying over them both. With mounting hopelessness Loki realizes Thor must not want him as badly as he thought he did. He might not even want him at all, after this.

"Never mind," Loki says at length, rubbing his face. His head is starting to throb, the pressure building behind his eyeballs. "I'm tired. I…..was not thinking clearly. I should not have been so presumptuous."

Abruptly, Thor sits up. Loki can feel him move about at his back, but does not bother to peek over his shoulder. He knows Thor is dressing himself, getting ready to leave. He's probably had enough of Loki's pathetic little display, and Loki does not blame him.

Then he feels Thor's hands slide under his waist.

"What are you doing?" Loki yelps as he is hefted up into Thor's strong embrace, blanket and all. He scrambles to latch his arms around Thor to keep himself steady, lest he let himself fall and further damage his ankle. But Thor's hold is secure, and his body is warm.

"Taking you to my bed," Thor says simply, like it's the most obvious thing in the world. "You want to sleep with me or not?"

Loki clings harder to Thor's neck.

"Yes," he breathes. "Yes, I do."

Chapter End Notes

feels good, yes?
Feedback is my world xox

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

IM ALIIIIIIVE
My beloved readers, have some melodramatic trashy thorki idfic to ring in the new year! *throws confetti* sorry for the wait. I was very distracted by RL this last year - in a good way!!!!!!!

I title this chapter, “Teresa cant write a thorki without including a scene in which loki pukes on thor’s boots.” Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once upon a time there was a king whose name was Thor.

Thor was just, handsome and much beloved by all. With the mighty hammer Mjolnir at his side, there was no enemy too great, no foe too powerful for Thor to overcome. King Thor kept the peace in the Realms, and brought prosperity to all that dwelt within it, just as his father had before him.

Now, sometime before Thor was crowned king, there came to the court of Asgard a foreign slave of unknown origin - a slave who some called a witch. This slave so enchanted the king with his beauty and wit that, in time, he rose in rank to become Thor’s favourite concubine, and eventually his only consort.

The noblemen of Asgard were perturbed. That the King would choose a titleless slave as a consort was quite unheard of in the history of Asgard. Many had harbored the hope that the King’s eye would turn to one of their daughters - but such was not to be, for Thor’s affection was steadfast.The noblemen blamed the King’s witch-consort. What else could stoke the King’s unnatural infatuation but black magic?

It was also said - by those who harbored no such jealousies in their hearts - that perhaps this consort of Thor’s was something of a blessing. As a youth, Thor had been well known for his princely arrogance and hot temper - so much so, that many feared Thor’s reign would be tainted by recklessness and wrath.

But these fears turned out to be unfounded. For, while Thor still had something of his old self about him, it was clear he had changed. Slower to anger and more inclined to seek counsel, Thor was as just a King as could be hoped for. Just as the late Queen Frigga had softened Thor’s father, it was concluded that this slave had softened King Thor.

Tales of the king's devotion - a devotion that transcended all barriers of race and class - travelled swiftly throughout Asgard. Bards composed odes in their honor, and travelling players reenacted their love story in villages throughout the land. The common people love a romance. Oft times the King and his companion could be seen riding in the Asgardian countryside, passing alms to the peasants they met along the way. It was said that a coin from the king's dark-haired beauty brought good fortune.

The people cared not that this consort was born a lowly foreigner and a slave. The king was made happy by his favourite, that was all that mattered.

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"Fifteen hundred gold coin." Thor booms over his expense report.

Thor's minister of finance shrinks, even as he stands over Thor's shoulder. "That was the clothier's bill, Majesty."

"The *what?"*

*"*The….clothier's bill. We thought you'd approved it…." he stammers. "The papers had your seal."

Thor gets up immediately, slamming his books closed. He's seen enough reports for today. Now he has more pressing matters to attend to.

Loki.

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It speaks to Loki's sense of familiarity that he hardly flinches when Thor storms in, even as all his attendants cower in the face of Thor's rage. Loki only sits up from where he'd been reclining, his eyebrows quirked in mild interest, as though he'd been expecting Thor for some time.

"Did you use my seal?" Thor bellows. "To go *shopping?"*

"Do you like it?" Loki smoothes over the filmy black fabric of his dress, his lips curl into a wide, smarmy grin. "Imported from Alfheim. The finest quality in all the Realms. Their embroidery is exquisite…"

"You spent fifteen hundred of my coin. On that."

"Of course not. But I could not decide between the green and the black. And then I thought…..why choose?"

"Loki…."

"And I needed new slippers to match…"

"Loki!"

Loki takes a sip of his tea casually. "I trust your meeting with the Princess went well."

Thor is unmoored, briefly. Loki could give a man whiplash with a subject change like that.

"Council demanded I meet with...." Thor's voice trails off. *Potential wives.* "....The dignitaries from Vanaheim, Princess Brynhilde amongst them. It's my duty; I take no pleasure in it."

"Yet you go along with it well enough," Loki says, and Thor knows from experience he's moments away from a full-blown sulk.

"Don't change the subject. You've spent far beyond your allowance. I've half a mind to make you return every piece, and sell your magic books to pay the difference."

“You wouldn’t!”

“*Try me.”*

“Should not the Consort of the King of Asgard be splendidly attired?” Loki counters, and now Thor can tell for certain he’s upset. “If I am to command respect among your courtiers, I must dress the part. They keep touting princesses in front of you. They don’t take my position seriously. They still see me as little more than some…” He crinkles his nose,”...chorus dancer.”

Thor doesn’t like the way he says it - with such contempt, as if he wasn’t once the most accomplished, mesmerizing performer Thor had ever seen. No mere chorus dancer to be sure.

Thor sighs. Where just moments earlier his temper burned hot, somehow, in the span of less than minute, Loki has disarmed him.

Thor seats himself on Loki’s footrest, taking his slippered foot in hand, and massaging it in a way he knows Loki likes. Thor has done this enough to be very good at it.

“I hardly think anyone would say that about you now.”

Loki makes a *pfft* noise. “Not to my face, maybe.”

“Is not the favor I bestow on you made plain? Would anyone doubt the sincerity of my affection for you?”

“No,” Loki says. “But -”

“Stars above, Loki, you can’t throw tantrums every time I tend to my official duties. The courtesy I extend to the princess is a formality, nothing more. You have ascended as far as the law allows. I keep you well, do I not? I expect better from you, Loki.”

Loki takes a token moment to consider this, as though weighing his odds of success were he to

pursue Thor in argument.

“Yes, you’re right,” Loki says at length, casting his eyes down. “It is not my place to question you.”

His put-on chastised puppy look is as phony as it is effective. Thor sighs again, this time in capitulation.

“What if we went riding tomorrow? Just you and I.”

Loki instantly brightens, shaking off his remorsefulness as easily as one would shoo a fly. “Really?”

“Yes,” Thor says.

“You said you hadn’t time this week -”

“I did,” Thor says, exasperated, because he truly doesn’t. But his treasury can’t keep footing the bill just because Loki feels *neglected.*

Loki throws his arms around Thor’s neck and accosts him with a kiss.

“Thank you,” he says.

Thor allows himself a few moments to bask in this affection before he peels Loki off him.

“No more spending Loki. You needn’t go to such lengths to get my attention.”

Loki nods vigorously. “Yes, of course.”

“I am serious.”

“I know you are,” Loki beams.

“If you continue behaving in this manner I will punish you. You used my seal without permission. I will not allow such acts of insubordination in my own household.”

“It worked though, didn’t it?”

Thor grabs Loki and hauls him up, and in one, fluid motion, Thor swats him firmly on the arse. Loki yelps in surprise, a blush forming high on his cheeks at being disciplined in front of the servants. But Thor knows he’s not so delicate as to not enjoy a bit of manhandling. And frankly, he deserves it.

Thor booms, "Consort Loki's allowance is suspended indefinitely. Until such a time as he learns some self control,” Thor narrows his eyes at Loki, “And obedience.”

The barest hint of a smirk is tugging the corners of Loki’s lips.

Again, he mouths to Thor.

It takes all of five seconds to shoo away the rest of their attendants.

“You’re a brat,” Thor tells him, after throwing Loki down on a nearby couch. “Haven’t I fucked you enough, you greedy thing?”

Loki just laughs gleefully. “Something tells me you like it.”

Thor climbs up over him, forcing himself between Loki’s legs. “If you spend me into debt I will take it out on your arse.”

“Words, words,” Loki says with an insouciant wave of his hand.

Thor growls. “Get on all fours.”

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“Do you think….:” Thor’s voice trails off. They are in bed and it is dark, Thor is lying on his stomach as Loki expertly works the knots in Thor’s back with his magic-warmed hands. Loki is good company when he’s been placated. “Do you think we would have ever….become lovers, if you were free and I were not King?”

It’s a stupid question and Thor knows it, and he’s grateful Loki doesn’t laugh. Loki’s hands stop rubbing at Thor’s shoulders as he considers.

“I don’t know. I’ve never thought about it.” Loki says earnestly from behind him. “Hard to picture a universe where you are not king.”

A cloying answer it is not, for which Thor is also grateful.

“What I mean is, if you were free, and we had crossed paths. I wonder if we would have liked each other.”

“I haven’t decided if I like you as it is.”

Thor makes an outraged noise. “Nor I, you!”

“Then we must agree we are only in this for the sex.”

“I’m being serious!” Thor laughs. “It is a serious question. Would you have liked me if you had been born free?”

“I *am* serious. The question is impossible to answer.”

“Why?” Thor turns over, and Loki shuffles to accommodate him, sitting astride Thor’s hips. “Is it so ridiculous?”

“Because,” Loki explains tiredly, as one would to a small child, “To imagine myself as free would be to imagine myself as a normal-sized Frost Giant, and I *know* you wouldn’t want to bed me then.”

“As a freed runtling, then,” Thor tries.”Humour me.”

Loki shakes his head. His eyes glimmer preternaturally in the darkness. “No such thing. Runts aren’t free even in Jotunheim. We are considered too small and weak to be on our own. If I remained there I would just be someone else’s property.”

Thor frowns. “So your answer is no.”

Loki just laughs. “Don’t sound so dejected, darling. I am sure in this absurd hypothetical of yours we would have still wound up in bed together - presuming, of course, our libidos remain the same. Would I have liked you? I don’t know; we would be…..different, that’s all. I choose not to dwell on such things. My life’s course could have taken many different directions. And in my estimation, the present one is by far the most agreeable. I quite enjoy the comforts my life here in Asgard affords, thank you.”

“I bet you do.” Thor says with a cocked eyebrow. Loki’s effect on his finances does not go unnoticed.

Loki chooses to ignore this. “Jotunheim is a wasteland, and its inhabitants are the most ill-humored, miserable lot to have ever drawn breath. I desire neither my fatherland, nor the company of my kindred. My home is in Asgard, at your side. Does that satisfy you?”

Thor sighs heavily. It’s not exactly the answer he was looking for, but he supposes it will have to do.

“Such contempt for Jotunheim,” Thor teases. “The good Ambassador would be bereft to hear you speak thus.”

“He is probably so used to being surrounded by bored, bleary expressions, that is just how he

thinks peoples' faces are set."

"You don't have to keep taking tea with him," Thor reminds him, as he often had before. "If you want an out will give you one."

Loki sighs, closing his eyes for longer than a blink. For awhile Thor thinks he won't answer.

"Like what?" Loki says, surprising Thor. It's the one bit of hesitation he's ever shown on the matter. "What would you say?"

"The truth of course: that he's incorrigibly dull and you'd rather muck out the stables than spend one more moment in his insufferable company."

"Oh, ha-ha," Loki deadpans, then turns thoughtful. "I have been meeting with Ambassador Helblindi for so long. Wouldn't he find it strange if I just…..suddenly stopped?"

Thor shrugs. Jotunheim is weak without its Casket - no valuable ally to Asgard. Thor can't say he'd really care if its tedious ambassador got offended.

"So?"

"So..." Loki repeats, doubtful. "It would just be….strange, is all. People would talk."

"So?" Thor says. "Let them."

Loki looks unconvinced.

"You don't like him," Thor says matter-of-factly. "I know you don't."

"I am happy to do this one service for Asgard, for my adopted homeland. For you," Loki answers. "Even if my contribution is small. The ambassador finds my relationship with you very promising…...he believes it bodes well for Asgard's relations with Jotunheim…."

“I don't need you to play diplomat for me, Loki,” Thor continues gently, stroking Loki’s side. “Such is not the duty of a King’s consort. Your place is in my bed.”

There is a flash of something across Loki’s face, but it fades just as quickly.

“Perhaps,” Loki says at last. He rolls his hips invitingly. They’d already fucked each other’s aggression out earlier that day, but even that wasn’t enough to satiate Loki’s bottomless appetite of late. There’s still something of the heat left in him, Thor thinks - as if they hadn’t spent all of the previous week fucking each other into blissful exhaustion. Thor was so fucked-out by the end of it he thought he’d be sworn off sex for at least a year. “But I get into less trouble when you keep me busy. Wouldn’t you say?”

Thor is inclined to agree.

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The fresh air and sunshine does him good, Thor admits, even if this outing had been brought about by Loki’s expert manipulation.

They ride for a few miles, darting their horses to and fro, playfully chasing after deer and foxes. Loki is a fast rider, perhaps faster than Thor (he’s lighter, Thor tells himself) and he loves nothing more than to beat Thor in a race. They stop near to a glade, where a crisp mountain spring empties into a small lake and where the grass is lush and plentiful. Loki dismounts and ties his horse, patting its nose with utmost tenderness. Of all the gifts Thor has given him, Loki clearly loves Svadilfari the most.

The sun is warm but is a slight chill to the air; autumn is fast approaching. This, of course, does not bother Loki, who takes off his boots and rolls up his trousers to go wade in the shallow, cool water. There, he wets his hands, face and hair, humming with appreciation as he does so. He’d been cooped up for more than a week with his heat, sequestered away in their private apartments. Little wonder he went to such lengths for this outing.

Thor watches him from the bank, safely out of Loki’s splashing range. He looks so natural out here, in plain doeskin clothes, with neither jewelry nor fine trappings, no servants and no constraints. Fleetingly, Thor pictures Loki living like this out in the countryside: hunting, collecting wild fruits, drinking from streams, and riding his horse wherever the wind might take him.

The thought makes Thor sad, somehow.

“So you’ve never thought about being free?” he prods. “Not even as an idle fantasy? You’ve never considered it even once?”

“Why? Are you offering?”

It’s meant as a joke, but Thor doesn’t laugh. He's not sure what he expected, asking a question like that. There’s a long, awkward pause in which all Thor can hear is the bright, mocking babble of the nearby spring.

“Well, if you must know,” Loki says quickly, recovering, “Yes, it has crossed my mind. But I must confess, the thought holds little appeal.” He shrugs, a lazy, indulgent grin on his face. “Who would take care of me?”

Secretly, Thor is relieved he’d dropped it. Some topics are…...difficult to discuss.

“Ah that’s right,” Thor says sagely. “You’d have to work. Get your fair white hands dirty with the rest of the common plebs. Gone would be the days of lounging on perfumed cushions on someone else’s coin.”

“Well, what else am I here for? I am not here to…..*play diplomat*…..as you say.” If Thor didn't know better, he'd swear he'd detected a hint of ice in Loki's voice. It's gone just as fast, however, and when Loki speaks again, it's in his normal, thoughtful voice. “I’ve never had to fend for myself. I’m not sure I would know how.”

“You’re hardly defenseless,” Thor tells him.

Loki is pleased by this, clearly, and though he ducks his head in modesty, a small smile lingers on his lips. Then, in one swift motion, he fires an energy bolt past Thor’s head. It whizzes past Thor’s shoulder and into the rocky outcrop behind him, fizzling out in seconds and leaving a smouldering plume of smoke in its wake.

Thor is more startled than he’d care to admit. Perhaps he should keep a closer eye on Loki's

magickal training. “Watch it!”

Loki clicks his tongue, his face set in a disappointed moue. “Missed.”

That *does it.* Before he even knows it, Thor is unclasping his cape and wriggling out of his boots impatiently.

“You’ll pay for that,” he promises.

Loki just stands in the middle of the lake, grinning like a madman and batting his eyelashes.

“I thought you said the water was too cold?”

Thor did, but he hardly notices that now as he charges into the water, soaking his pants all the way up to the thigh. Loki ducks out of the way, firing more energy bolts into the water as he goes and laughing gleefully all the while. He’s purposefully missing, Thor knows, but the bolts make large enough splashes that Thor’s chase is thrown off course. Every time Thor gets close, Loki fires a bolt and splashes water right up into Thor’s face. And it is *cold.*

“Do you never tire of provoking me?” Thor shouts, mopping his wet hair out of his eyes.

“Provoking you? I just thought you could use the refreshment.”

Loki may have his magic, but Thor is strong, and much faster than he looks. He plows through the water with more ease than Loki expects, and in a forceful burst, he closes much of the distance between them. Loki turns to flee, but the water is deeper now, and Loki’s movement is much impeded by it. Thor uses the opportunity to pounce him.

“Do you yield?” Thor says, having successfully pinned Loki against his chest.

Loki pants breathlessly, and only squirms harder.

“Yield, Loki!” Thor says again, and this time accentuates his command with a rub to the ribs - right

where Loki is most ticklish - for no other reason than because Thor knows he *hates* it.

Loki squeals, *eh-he-he-he-he,* and wriggles ferociously in an attempt to free himself. But he's no match for Thor's limitless strength, and with his hands restrained thusly, he no longer can summon any magic to assist him.

"I yield, I yield!" he laughs. "Damn you, I yield!"

But Thor doesn't let go, not even when all the tension drains from Loki's body and he begins melting into Thor's embrace rather than struggling against it. Their eyes meet, and all of a sudden Thor realizes they're having a *moment,* right there, waist-deep in water, in the middle of a lake. In the back of his mind Thor thinks they must like a pair of fools…...for a king to conduct himself in such a childish manner…...

But when Loki tilts his head up and places a gentle kiss on Thor's lips, all disapproving thoughts melt away.

It's a sweet kiss - innocent, even, lacking in heat, but replete with…..something else. Something Thor can't quite name. Something that makes Thor's stomach flutter and his knees weak.

When Loki pulls away, his face is soft and fond. Strands of loose, wet hair curl attractively about his face, and dewy droplets cling to his skin. There is an otherworldliness about him that is so unlike the beauty of any Asgardian maid. Sometimes Thor thinks that even if they spent ten lifetimes together, Thor will never completely figure Loki out.

"To answer your question - I am quite happy to belong to you," Loki says, earnest in a way that leaves no room for doubt. Then he kisses Thor again.

When he pulls away this time, however, his face is mischievous. It's all the warning Thor gets before Loki sneaks a foot behind him, tripping him and sending him flailing backwards into the water.

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Thor watches quietly as Loki wrings out the excess water out of his hair. Thor's only consolation was that he made sure Loki got as wet as he did - though he doubts Loki is suffering as much for it.

Having called a truce, they settle on the lake's grassy bank to dry themselves out. The clouds have parted at least, and with the sunshine comes much-appreciated warmth. They recline on Thor's cape, and Loki sets about redoing Thor's braids, most of which had come undone in their romp. Thor has always loved having Loki play with his hair - so much so that Loki's now the only one who is allowed to tie his braids.

It's only now that Thor realizes just how much he needed this outing - perhaps even more than Loki did.

"Is something troubling you?" Loki asks, his voice a soothing lull. "Why all these troublesome thoughts of late?"

Because I keep turning down princesses for you and I need to understand why.

"Oh, I don't know," Thor sighs. "We make an unlikely pair, is all."

"That we do." Loki finishes Thor's braids and they sit there in amiable silence for a time, content to soak in the beauty of their surroundings.

"Sometimes I feel….like you're the only person I can really talk to."

A soft smile graces Loki's lips.

"It is an honour to hear you say so," Loki says, "But - forgive me. You have many in your retinue who can fill that role. Lady Sif, Lord Fandral, Volstagg...."

Thor shakes his head. All good, loyal friends to be sure, but their friendship with Thor had not come about organically. They were deemed worthy of being Thor's companions by virtue of their noble birth, and were hand-selected by Odin to be Thor's playmates when they were younglings. They would be grieved to disobey Odin, even now. Thor doesn't doubt the sincerity of their affection but he is not sure they would have been friends, circumstances being any other than they are.

Thor realizes the irony of this, given that Loki had no choice in his circumstances either. He tucks

this thought away and rolls over to face Loki.

"You mean that? You are happy to belong to me? I do want you to be happy, Loki."

Loki seems surprised by this. "Of course I'm happy. Why wouldn't I be?"

Thor doesn't know what to say to that. The deeper, darker part of him could list a few reasons why.

Loki gazes somewhere beyond the lake. “Your father asked me that - if I was happy. And I told him I was. I meant it. Your father showed me more kindness than I had ever known, but -” He turns and looks at Thor, “I was nowhere near as happy with him as I am with you.”

Thor crosses his arms, suddenly disengaged. “Yes, I am glad he was so good to you. How splendid for you.”

“You’re upset,” Loki says.

“I am not.”

“You are. You don’t like to hear me talk about him. You always shut down when I bring him up.”

“I honestly don’t care.”

Loki shoots him a knowing smirk. “My dear, you are many things, but a convincing liar is not one of them. You know what I think?” Loki pauses, if only for dramatic effect, because it’s obvious he’s going to tell Thor anyway. “I think you were jealous of me.”

Thor sputters. “*Jealous*!?”

“Yes,” Loki says boldly, tilting his head up. “I think you were jealous of the attention Odin lavished on me, and resentful that he gave it so freely.”

Thor's mouth falls open. The accuracy of it skews him to the core.

How dare you, Thor would have said, if Loki had not laid a finger over his lips.

"*Which,* I do not blame you for." Loki continues. "You had every right to be upset. Your father loved you, Thor. He was merely…..confused."

Thor huffs, ripping out out a handful of grass at his side. "Aye, he loved me so much he went into deep mourning and left me to handle his entire kingdom on my own."

"He trusted you would rise to the occasion."

"You put so much faith in him, you know that? Can my father do no wrong in your eyes? You do nothing but defend him." Thor adds under his breath, "I am glad he will not wake."

"I am only speaking to his intentions," Loki says evenly. "I believe they were good, even if it did not always seem that way."

"What do you know about it?" Thor snaps, and Loki falls silent.

"Close your eyes," Loki says at length.

"What for?"

"You will see."

Thor bristles. How can one see with their eyes closed?

"I'm not playing anymore, Loki. I'm in no mood for tricks."

"This isn't a trick, I promise you," Loki says steadily. Then, quieter, he adds, "I want to show you

something.”

“Show me what?”

“You will see,” Loki says again.

“I’m not doing anything until you tell me what you’re going to do!”

“Would you please just trust me, Thor?” Loki asks.

Norns, but it is hard to refuse him sometimes. Stiffly, Thor allows Loki to lay him backwards onto the grass. He feels Loki’s cool palm against his forehead.

“Relax,” Loki repeats. Then Thor’s vision goes white.

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There is light all round. Everything is soft and out of focus, until slowly, details start melding together. Wherever Thor is, it’s not anywhere he recognizes. He’s kneeling, but his body isn’t his. His skin is too fair, his wrists and fingers too finely boned. His clothes are little more than a light silk tunic, and in them he feels so, so exposed…

Above him is seated Odin in a great armchair, physically imposing in a way that Thor hadn't experienced since he was a small child. Thor knows, intellectually, that the apparition of his resurrected father should come as a bit of a shock, but in fact this feels quite normal - like nothing at all is out of the ordinary.

“We leave for Asgard tomorrow,” Odin says in a gentle tone Thor has never heard before. “Back into the den of wolves. Ah, just wait until you see the city, child. It is like nothing else in all the realms. Golden spires reaching into the clouds, the Bifrost glittering on the horizon. The tales do not do it justice.”

A sickly knot twists in Thor’s stomach - dread.

“I am eager to behold it, my lord,” Thor says, though not in his voice and not of his own volition.

“I should like to see my son again…..” Odin says wistfully. “It has been far too many years.”

Thor tenses at the mention of the Prince Regent. He can’t say he’s looking forward to meeting the Prince with quite as much anticipation. There are….rumors.

“He still seems to me that blond, bright-eyed, mischievous boy I knew so long ago. Now regent of Asgard! How time slips from my fingers. The people love him, too. Ah, he was always their favorite. Ever since the day he was born. My golden son. As beautiful as his mother.”

“The people love you too,” Thor offers.

Odin laughs, though it degenerates into a slight cough. “People are fickle; they are quick to forget. They loved me, aye, when I was young. But now I am old and sickly, and can bring them neither glory nor victory. Such is the way of things. My time has passed. It is Thor’s time now.”

“I am sure the Prince will be glad to have you home.”

Odin looks uncomfortable. “…..Perhaps. I regret we have not spoken much since her passing…..”

“Queen Frigga….” Thor whispers reverently.

Odin smiles in that sad, regretful manner of his. “I doubt he would even notice my presence in Asgard. Sometimes I think…...he considers me a burden to him. I think he wishes me gone for good. Perhaps it would be for the best.”

“My lord,” Thor gasps. “I am sure that’s not true.”

“I often wonder if I could have done more for him in his youth, when he needed guidance as only a father could provide. But I was selfish. Too preoccupied I was with my own grief. I fear he is deeply wounded, and I have only myself to blame. Our relationship is beyond repair.”

“If I may be so bold,” Thor offers softly, “Shouldn’t this be a conversation to have with the Prince?”

“Oh, my darling, innocent boy. How sweet you are to say so, but I am afraid it is too late. The damage is too extensive to bridge. I doubt Thor would even listen to me if I tried. He is a stubborn man. Hot-headed and proud. Was I not the same at his age? It’s no mystery where he gets that temper! But he is young. The years will even him out, grant him wisdom. Just as they did for me. All I can do now is stand back and allow him the space to grow.”

“You are all I have left.” He takes Thor’s face in his hands. There is an unshed tear in his good eye. “My Loki. My Loki.”

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Thor’s eyes pop open. There is wetness at his temples. He can’t remember who or where he is, at first, until Loki’s concerned face comes into focus, silhouetted against the open sky.

“What was that?” Thor croaks. His throat is unnaturally dry, as though coated in dust.

“A memory,” Loki answers simply.

“*Your* memory.”

“Aye,” says Loki quietly, “I have been saving it for you.”

Thor scrubs a hand over his face. The residue of the memory lingers, the way a bad nightmare does when one has only just awoken. It was so….vivid.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” is all he can think to say.

“I have never tried it.”

Thor squints at him. “Until now?”

“You’re my kin,” Loki says, and pauses a long while. “You’re my mate.”

Thor just blinks up at him dumbly, so Loki explains:

“You partnered me during my first heat cycle. In Jotunheim that would make you my mate…we’re connected. *Kin.* There is now a channel between us that allows for that kind of communication. We call it a Bridge. I am sorry if it was disorientating. I thought it easier to show, rather than to explain…..”

“Oh.” Thor says. There is still so much about Loki and his magic that Thor simply does not understand. “No, thank you. It….meant a lot to me. To see that.”

Loki smiles gently - sympathetically. Thor isn’t sure he likes it. It makes him feel weak.

“Can you….see into my memories?”

“I can only see what you are willing to show me. If you wanted to share….” Loki’s voice trails off, and he falls silent.

“Yes! Yes, of course.” Thor exclaims, suddenly very taken with the idea, and eager to change the subject. He props himself up on his elbows. “Perhaps not right now…..but….I think I would like to share some memories of my mother with you. I wish you could have met her.”

Loki blinks. “Really?”

Thor feels his cheeks heat. “Yeah. Yes. I mean, if she had known you as my consort….I think she would have liked you.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I don’t know.” Thor says honestly, suddenly feeling quite silly for blurting that out. He was never

inclined to talk about his mother before, and he's as stunned as Loki at his own admission. Feeling the need to explain himself somewhat, he goes on: "You make me happy. Why wouldn't she like you?"

Loki is watching him carefully, an unreadable expression on his face. There is a long pause.

"Yes, I would like that. I would be honoured," Loki says at length.

"But not today," Thor adds quickly. "It is getting late, and I am soaked to the bone. We should return to the palace."

Loki smiles tightly. "No, not today."

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The more Thor thinks about it in the following days, the more he kicks himself for his hasty offer. It's not like he doesn't want to share memories with Loki….just maybe….not those particular ones?

Thor doesn't like to dwell on thoughts of his mother. That's nothing against Loki.

"I….changed my mind. About the memory sharing," Thor announces without preamble, having barged into their shared apartments. Upon his arrival, Loki closes the book he'd been reading and sets it in his lap.

"Oh," is all he says.

"I'm just…..not ready," Thor goes on inelegantly. He knows he doesn't have to explain himself but he rambles on anyway. "It's a very sensitive matter for me. My mother. You understand."

Loki nods, that same tight-lipped smile on his face. "Of course."

Having said his peace, Thor leaves, if only to avoid having to suffer the disappointment on Loki's face. When he returns to their living area, he finds that Loki hasn't moved, his book still unopened in his lap.

"It doesn't have to be….that," Loki says, staring into the hearth. His voice is very quiet. "You can share any memory with me, so long as it's one you remember well."

Grudgingly, Thor considers this. He mentally cycles through his memories, but winds up vetoing them all just as quickly. What could he possibly share with Loki? Memories of battle, of great hunts? So many of Thor's memories are….unsavory, at best. Not exactly things he'd want Loki to see.

Thor chews his inner lip. "You really want me to show you something?"

"Of course I do," Loki says, patting the seat beside him until Thor joins him on the couch. He rubs Thor's thigh encouragingly. "Anything you'd be willing to share."

"Alright." Thor acquiesces, settling on a memory at last. "Alright, I have one. How do I -"

Loki instantly brightens. "Just relax, face me."

Thor does, settling into the cushions, tense as a bowstring.

"Relax," Loki chides.

"I am," Thor says gruffly.

All at once, Loki kisses him. When Loki pulls away, he's smiling. Thor finds he's smiling too. Loki has a way of defusing Thor's ill moods.

"Close your eyes, deep breaths. I am going to try to build the Bridge now. It might feel….odd. Even invasive. Focus on the chosen memory as intensely as you can, and replay it over and over in your mind. When you're ready, let me in." Loki says quickly, like he's worried if he takes too long Thor might back out again. He isn't wrong.

“How will I know how to do that?”

“You’ll know,” Loki says. “It will feel like a natural release of pressure. Building the Bridge is by far the most difficult part of the process. But you must remember - I cannot enter into your mind if you do not let me. You are in control, and we can stop at any point. Alright?”

Thor shifts in his seat. This all seems so alien, so dangerous. But, for whatever reason, Thor feels he owes this to Loki. So, Thor nods his assent.

Loki begins by laying his hand on Thor’s forehead. Slowly, Thor begins to feel a buildup of pulsing energy, boring into his skull. It’s not painful, but it’s not exactly pleasant either.

“Focus,” Loki tells him, cutting through the static in Thor’s ears. “And breathe.”

It’s hard for Thor to concentrate on his memory. The energy at his forehead is distracting, claustrophobic, like it’s closing in on him, waiting for entry at the periphery of his mind. As though his brain were a city under siege.

“Breathe,” Loki says again, his voice now very far away.

Thor does, deeply. And with one fortifying exhale, he opens.

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They come to, some immeasurable time later. Loki sits back, blinking.

“You kissed Lady Sif?”

Thor rubs out the spots behind his eyes. Gods, that makes a person feel dizzy. “Aye.”

Loki’s face is scrutinizing. “And she hit you.”

“She did.” Clocked Thor right in the face, and gave him a bloody nose to boot. She’d felt awful about it afterwards, and was justifiably terrified of what Odin would do to her, though in the end Thor was too embarrassed to tattle. Sif had a mean right hook, even as a thirteen year old.

Loki’s brows knot. “Why in the world would you show me that?”

Belatedly, Thor wonders if that was perhaps not the best first memory to share. Thor hadn’t stopped to think if kissing were something of a sensitive topic for Loki, given their….history.

“Because I thought you might think it funny?” he tries.

Loki’s lips twitch, and slowly his face cracks into a wide grin. Then, he laughs.

“But perhaps not as funny as that,” Thor says, though secretly, he’s pleased to see Loki laugh so unabashedly. When Loki isn’t watching himself, his laugh comes out as an almost absurd giggle: *eh-he-he-he*. It’s rare, but nothing pleases Thor more than to hear it.

“Forgive me,” Loki says, not sounding sorry at all. “It’s just…..I never would have pictured….”

“.....me desiring Sif that way?” Thor finishes. “Well, trust me, it was a mistake I was not quick to replicate.”

Loki smiles crookedly. And he laughs again, *eh-he-he.*

***

They take turns sharing memories after that. Nothing as substantial as that first memory, however; they both seem content to keep things on the lighthearted side. Loki shows him some of the exotic places he’d visited before his arrival in Asgard, and his first impressions of the gilded city. He shares more memories of Odin, which Thor admits has the effect of softening his opinion of the old man somewhat.

“What of Jotunheim?” Thor asks one day. “Would you show me something of your youth there?”

Thor can’t help that he’s curious. He’s never been to Jotunheim, but from what he’s heard, it sounds like an absolute shithole.

“Forgive me. I have few memories of Jotunheim, and what I do remember I would.....prefer not to evoke. It was not a happy time in my life.”

Thor is disappointed at Loki’s refusal, but not entirely surprised. Loki never speaks much about his past.

“As you wish.”

Loki offers a small grateful smile. “Come, then. I will show you something else.”

***

The fourth time Thor shares a memory is when everything falls apart.

Thor remembers his first flight with Mjolnir as vividly as the day it happened. Thor had rarely felt such joy or exhilaration in his entire life. Nor such freedom - the wind, the speed, the unbridled power. Whizzing past countless cities and villages, mountains and streams and meadows. How right it felt, to be united with Mjolnir in this way.

Thor recalls this memory with such precision it’s obvious to him when something is slightly off. He senses Loki’s presence as something of a shadow: unobtrusive and inoperative. Thor knows that Loki is seeing what he sees, feeling what he feels. It’s actually quite thrilling to show Loki this; and Thor must admit the Bridge is much more comfortable now that that horrible pressure has been relieved.

Thor laughs madly, his happiness immeasurable. He knows Loki feels this too, which only compounds his joy.

Before too long Thor grows complacent, and lets the memory run on autoplay. The memory is

much more vivid with all the attentive magickal energies Loki is supplying, but there is only so much Thor remembers, and before long the vision starts to turn black around the edges.

"Focus," Thor thinks he hears Loki say. Thor can't tell where his voice is coming from, if it's real or if it's in his head.

The memory is losing detail at a rapid pace. Collapsing. Falling away like shattered glass. Thor isn't flying anymore. He's back at the palace, in his audience room. Looking down at Loki, crumpled on the marble floor, his ankle jutting out at an unnatural angle.

Thor is horrified: both that he'd let the memory slip, and within the memory itself. But it's not like he can stop it. It is a memory after all, and it must play out they way it was remembered.

Thor reaches for Loki and Loki recoils in what could only be described as terror. He's panting wildly, like a frightened animal, as though Thor were a bird of prey come to finish him off.

Thor's attention is diverted to the crowds of faces who circle the scene: ladies in waiting, attendants, courtiers. Whispering. Eyes fixated accusingly at him. His reputation is such that they no doubt can put two and two together. They're all staring at him. It's because they know. Thor is a brutal man, sometimes.

Thor envisions the entirety of his rule like this. A tyrant, taking what he wants at will. Lustful, hot-tempered, and impulsive. Nothing at all like his benevolent mother. Regarded by all with fear and contempt.The people of Asgard may be enchanted with him now - young and handsome as he is - but they will soon grow disillusioned. And then how would he be remembered?

Thor the Cruel.

Thor sees all of this reflected in Loki's terrified face. Thor wants deeply to reach down and console him, but he knows this would only make everything worse. He's done enough damage. Moreover, he isn't sure he could take having Loki flinch from him again.

Thor decides, then and there, that he would not let himself be that kind of man….that kind of King. He'd just have to be better. Rein in his temper. Show compassion. But….Thor has never done those things in his life. He isn't sure he knows how, or where to even begin…

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Thor jolts awake, sitting upwards with so much force his vision spots. Loki is still sitting across from him, wide-eyed and equally bewildered. His hand hangs in mid-air, like he'd abruptly retracted it from Thor's forehead.

And, because he doesn't know what else to do, Thor gets angry.

"You didn't tell me that could happen," Thor accuses.

"I didn't - " Loki says. He opens his hands reactively. "I didn't think it would."

"How much did you see?" Thor asks lowly.

Loki wets his lips, swallowing tightly. It's answer enough.

Thor can tell Loki is bracing himself - he's afraid. Just like in the memory. Sometimes, Thor thinks nothing has changed between them.

"No more….Bridges." Thor says, getting up. "We're not speaking of this ever again."

"Yes, my king," Loki says, even as Thor is already fleeing out the door.

****

And they don't speak of it - Not in bed that night, nor at breakfast, nor the following evening. Thor catches Loki eyeing him oddly every now and again, a vague, unreadable expression on his face. It soon begins to grate on Thor's nerves.

"What?" Thor eventually snaps.

"Nothing," Loki answers mildly. "My lord."

All through the week, Loki comports himself like a sweet little lamb, knowing better than to provoke Thor when he's in a mood. Now that Thor knows Loki better, his servility seems so put-on, so phony. It only annoys Thor further.

Thor knows he shouldn't be angry about it. But he *is.* Something about that….that *Bridge* left a sour taste in his mouth. He isn't sure what happened to make his memory collapse - if it was his fault or Loki's. Thor is too unfamiliar with that kind of magic to tell. He should never have agreed to it in the first place. He should not have let himself be so vulnerable. So exposed.

And it had to be that memory, didn't it? Thor had tried so hard *not* to think about it, maybe that's why it was so quick to spring to mind.

For the last few years, Thor was quite content to pretend none of that *unpleasantness* happened. Loki had never once mentioned it either - as though he'd completely banished those experiences from his mind. If Thor were a braver man, he might've asked Loki to show him his memories of that night, when Thor had so brutally mistreated him. Loki must think about it, sometimes. Why wouldn't he? Did Thor really expect him to forget?

No matter what sweet words Loki entices him with, there must still be a part of him that hates Thor fiercely.

Which is why, when Loki tries to make pleasant small talk over breakfast, Thor is only irritated.

"The leaves are changing colours. You can really notice it now." Loki says. It's an uncharacteristically bland comment, coming from him. The kind of comment that makes Thor feel like Loki's treating him with kid gloves.

What else do you expect him to do? Thor's mind supplies. *You're acting as ornery as a bear with a sliver stuck in its paw.*

Thor just grunts and shovels more egg into his mouth. They don't talk any more, after that.

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Loki does indeed look resplendent in his ill-gotten clothes, Thor must concede. The dark, bold colours he favours now make him look striking, rather than just beautiful. Loki takes Thor's right arm like he belongs there, like it was never anyone else's to begin with, even though by status he should only take Thor's left. Thor allows this breach of tradition, because when Loki has Thor's right arm, there is less weight on his left ankle. Though Loki has never explicitly said so, Thor knows he's self-conscious about his slight limp.

Thor is reminded, grimly, that it was in front of these very ambassadors that Loki had broken his ankle, some three years before. If this bothers Loki, given that that memory must be as fresh in his mind as it is in Thor's, he certainly doesn't let it show. He stares them all down proudly, like a born aristocrat. Even the boldest of Thor's courtiers do not let their gazes linger.

"You know I must dance with the Princess," Thor says casually midway through supper, with enough firmness Loki would know not to protest. He's not asking for Loki's permission. "It would be impolite of me not to."

Loki looks more interested in his venison than in Thor's justifications. He pats his lips daintily with his napkin and nods. "Yes, of course. My lord."

Most of the time, when Loki calls him that, it's because they are in public and Loki knows that he must behave. But sometimes, *sometimes,* Loki calls him that when he wants to be a brat. It's in the tone of voice - that *barest* hint of sarcasm, so subtle Thor's not sure he picks up on it every time.

This could pass for either. And Thor is still a bit testy.

"I mean it. We've already settled the matter and I won't hear another word about it."

"Yes, my lord. I'm not disagreeing."

Thor stiffly sits back in his chair, and for a brief, nonsensical moment, misses the Loki who would fight him a bit on these things.

This occasion - a celebration of the renewed trading contract and peace agreement with Vanaheim - is a very subdued affair, relatively speaking. Mead flows freely, and there's more food than could be eaten by these guests in an entire week. Usually Thor enjoys a good feast, but tonight he truly wishes he were just taking supper in their private rooms. Not that Thor has much say in the matter.

If he weren't present it might cause an international incident. The idea that a king can do as he pleases is a pervasive misconception indeed.

Exacerbating Thor's foul mood is the sea of eyes fixed on him, watching with anticipation to see whether Thor will show even the smallest shred of interest in the guest of honour, Princess Brynhilde. They all hoping for a match, Thor knows, especially since Brynhilde's older cousin Amora had fallen so spectacularly out of favor.

This whole feast is nothing but a thinly-veiled excuse to dangle a pretty, fresh-faced princess in front of him, the fact of which must be as evident to Loki as it is to Thor. Thor's councillors don't outright say so, but they don't have to: Loki is politically useless. Thor's taste for concubines was all well and good when he was younger, but now that Thor is King, they all expect him to settle down and find himself a proper *queen.*

Thor glances over to Loki, proud, intelligent, and beautiful, whom Thor has elevated above all others, and feels miserable. There is no decree in the world that could change the fact that Loki is a born slave.

Princess Brynhilde is indeed very pretty with her rosy lips, freckles and auburn hair, and she seems quite bright, if a little too interested in horses, horseback riding, and some foreign sport from Vanaheim played on horseback. She is clearly flustered by Thor, and when Thor takes her hand, it's cold and clammy. She's a stiff dancer, with none of Loki's grace and assuredness. Were Thor to marry her, Loki would *eat her alive.*

If Thor's advisors want to find him a queen, they better try harder.

Nonetheless, Thor is polite, and escorts her back to her seat after their dance. He even kisses her hand, just to give the rumor mill something to talk about. Predictably, the crowd buzzes. It would be almost comical, if it weren't so inane.

He returns to his throne, where Loki sits at his left side. For a moment Thor thinks Loki will say something about it, but he doesn't.

The festivities wear on and Thor drinks, now able to cut loose a bit since his ceremonial role has been fulfilled. It'll help him forget about the talking-to he'll no doubt receive from his advisors tomorrow morning.

Deep in his cups, Thor starts to feel better, so much so that when the court players come to put on a comedy for the entertainment of the guests, Thor gets into it and joins in the laughter at some of the farcical antics. It's a welcome distraction. At his side, Loki is reclined, his head lolled against the back of his chair. He doesn't respond at even the most crowd-pleasing slapstick. In fact, half the time his eyes are closed.

He better not be pouting, Thor thinks to himself sourly. The last thing Thor needs right now is Loki acting like a sulking child in front of all their guests. Thor isn't in the mood to confront him on it, however, so he ignores him and focuses exclusively on the comedy. It works, for awhile - though he's hyperaware of Loki, completely still and unmoving at his side.

"I am…..not feeling well," Loki whispers to him, mid-way through the second act. "I believe shall retire for the evening."

Thor squints at him. He's not sure he believes that. "It's not even midnight."

"I am not feeling well," Loki repeats.

"What is it?" Thor frowns, searching Loki's face for any sign of upset, but finds none.

"Just...tired." Loki smiles weakly, and kisses Thor's forehead. "Too many sweets. Do not worry yourself, darling."

"I was hoping to….." Thor whispers hotly, running his knuckle down Loki's thigh. The drink is mellowing him out somewhat, and exacerbating his baser impulses.

"Now?" Loki says.

Thor just nods, slowly, suddenly very disinterested in the players before him and *very* interested in something else.

Loki glances fleetingly about them, chewing his lip.

"Yes," he answers finally. "Quickly."

In the darkness, it's easy to slip away to an empty side room, and servants know better than to follow anyway. Thor steers Loki towards an alcove blocked partly by a heavy curtain. It's as good a place as any for a late night tryst. Thor anticipates that maybe Loki might resist this a bit - Loki overwhelmingly prefers to be fucked in their bed - but to Thor's great delight, Loki doesn't make a fuss, and dutifully parts his lips so Thor can kiss him.

Loki makes quick work of the laces on Thor's breeches, unfastening them just enough to wriggle his hand in and take hold of Thor's cock. Thor bucks his hips at this - drinking makes him impatient. Loki rubs at him methodically, as if with the singular goal of making Thor come. Generally, when they fuck, Loki is engaged and willing. Loki touches himself and chases his own pleasure, and never needs that much stimulation before he's slick enough for Thor to enter him.

This isn't one of those times.

This is one of those times when Loki is putting up with it. Thor doesn't know if it's because of the weird friction between them lately, or because he knows Loki doesn't like it when he drinks too much, or because Loki is simply as tired as he says. All he knows is that if he wanted a halfhearted handjob, he probably could've gotten the Princess to do it.

"You're not in the mood," Thor observes flatly.

Loki glances up. His eyes glint dully in the dim light.

"I am," Loki says.

"Are you wet enough to take my cock?" Thor asks harshly.

"I can be," Loki says. "In a minute."

Thor grunts. He didn't think this would be such a chore for Loki.

"Can't you just suck me then?" Thor says, pathetically close to a whine. And, because he's an asshole and can't quite help himself, "*Quickly?"*

Loki hesitates again, casting a quick glance beyond Thor's shoulder for any sign of peering eyes. Then, satisfied that they weren't followed, Loki drops to his knees. He wastes no time in taking Thor's cock into his mouth, swirling his tongue over the head the way he knows Thor likes. His enthusiasm would suggest that he's trying to get this over with as quickly as possible, but now Thor is too distracted to care.

"That's good, Loki," Thor groans, mollified. He thrusts gently into Loki's mouth to encourage him.

Loki backs off as soon as Thor's cock hits the back of his throat. He coughs.

"Can you just…..just let me?" Loki croaks, grabbing Thor's cock at the base. He resumes sucking shallowly at the tip and using his hand to jack Thor off.

It's good, really good, but Thor doesn't think he can come like this. Loki usually takes him deeper.

Thor grabs a fistful Loki's hair and bucks a bit. Not that he's trying to be rough - it's just that when he's aroused he gets a little bit antsy. But again, as soon as Thor hits the back of Loki's throat, Loki recoils. This time he's gagging. His chin is shiny with spit.

"Could you be gentler?" Loki wheezes, sitting back on his heels and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Please."

Thor huffs. He'll never get off at this rate. "If you can't take it -."

Loki shakes his head, stubborn. "Just go slow."

At that, Loki tries again, pointedly gripping Thor's dick at the base to control him. Loki redoubles his efforts, sucking madly and using his tongue and lips for best effect. Thor has to grant that he's trying, and it does feel good. It's just not *enough,* and soon Thor loses patience and thrusts. But this time, Loki does more than gag. He vomits, heaving up his dinner all over Thor's boots.

Having emptied the entire contents of his stomach, Loki covers his mouth, clearly horrified. Thor is horrified too, and not just at the puddle of vomit he's now standing in.

“I am...so sorry.” Loki says at last.

Thor quickly tucks his cock in his pants (had he ever lost an erection faster?) and crouches down to Loki’s level, unmindful of the mess.

“Loki,” he says, alarmed. “Are you alright?”

Loki just shakes his head, clearly mortified. “I am so, so sorry. I made a mess of you -.”

“Never mind that,” Thor says. He takes Loki’s flushed, wet face in his hands, and brushes the stray hairs away from his forehead. “Why didn’t you tell me to stop?”

Loki just pants raggedly and shrugs.

“Loki, why didn’t you tell me to stop?”

“I didn’t want you to be angry with me.” Loki whispers hoarsely.

“I’m not angry at you,” Thor hushes. “Loki, I’m not angry with you.”

Loki shakes his head, disbelieving. “Yes you are. You’re angry I made the memory collapse. But I didn’t mean to. I didn’t meant to, I swear -”

Thor’s heart wrenches in his chest. How can he explain it to make Loki understand?

“I’m not angry. Not with you. Not about - that. This….this isn’t about that. What happened was an accident. Neither your fault nor mine. Do you believe me?”

Loki just shrugs again.

“You’re burning,” Now that Thor has regained some of his wits, he notices for the first time how gray Loki's face is. He *is* ill. Thor hadn’t believed him before.Thor didn’t think it were possible, but now he feels worse.

Norns. He really hasn’t changed at all, has he?

“You should have told me no, Loki. Why didn’t you just say no?”

Loki shoots him a look: *You know why.*

“I’m not going to replace you,” Thor assures him gently. “Even if you did tell me no. I don’t want anyone else.”

Loki just stares, that same unreadable, searching expression on his now-feverish face.

“I just want to go to bed,” Loki mumbles.

“Yes, of course.” Thor gathers him gently into his arms. “I’ll get you a healer.”

Loki grimaces. “I’m sure I’ll feel better now that I’ve…” He motions to the pile of vomit. “It was probably a bout of food sickness.”

“*I’d* feel better if we did get a healer.”

Loki makes the smallest little amused smile, which Thor takes as a good sign. Then Loki goes slack in Thor’s embrace. “As you like.”

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Loki vomits again when they reach the bedchamber - only stomach acid this time - and his condition quickly deteriorates from there. His fever worsens, so Thor has all the windows in their Imperial suite opened as wide as they can go. The chill will help, Thor thinks.

The healers give Loki a tonic to help him sleep. Thor anxiously hovers over Loki's prone body as he slowly succumbs to the medicine.

Fjora is confident in her diagnosis - that Loki's illness was, in fact, brought on by a bit of food sickness - and Thor allows himself to be reassured that Loki will recover in due time. It's nearly three in the morning when Thor finally falls asleep at Loki's side.

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Loki does not wake in the morning, nor the evening thereafter. Thor's worry turns to rage.

"I thought you said he'd get better," Thor growls, pacing restlessly at the foot of Loki's bed.

Fjora, usually so calm and collected, now looks quite nervous. It's probably the static electricity in the air. She'd never failed Thor in anything - let alone in something as serious as this. "We thought he would, Majesty, truly, we did what we thought was best - "

"I care not for your excuses! Just make him well, or I swear to you, you will rue the day you were ever appointed to this post."

At that, Thor storms away. It's easier than looking upon Loki's feverish, unresponsive face.

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On the third day, Thor's rage turns to desperation.

"*Do something,"* Thor pleads. "Anything. Whatever the cost. Offer a reward."

Thor's healers exchange fleeting glances amongst themselves. They aren't telling him something.

"What is it?" Thor says. "Speak, damn you!"

“Majesty, we have some…..ill news.” Fjora swallows nervously, “It is our opinion that…..Consort Loki was poisoned.”

The word hangs in the air. Its significance does not register for a solid few seconds.

“....*What?*” it comes out as almost a whisper.

“Poisoned, My King,” she says again. “At the feast.”

Thor is aghast. “But we ate of the same dishes! I have my food tasted! That’s not possible!”

“The poison was one specific to the Jotun race…” Fjora explains, “Loki was…..targeted. That is why Your Majesty was unaffected.”

“Targeted!? By whom?” Thor immediately thinks of those present at the feast that night: all of Thor’s ambassadors and counsellors. The Princess and her retinue. Vanaheim’s dignitaries. Amora’s relatives. Many who would stand to benefit from having Loki out of the picture.

But to poison Loki so brazenly? While he sits at Thor’s side? The thought is….unfathomable.

“We do not know, sire,” is all Fjora says, softly.

“You’re sure?” Thor asks, his throat dry. “You’re sure it’s foul play?”

“We found evidence of it in his blood sample, Majesty. The poison is a rare one, erstwhile unknown to us. It was through sheer luck that we managed to identify it.”

Electricity crackles in the air. Thor swears he will find the one who did this, and make them suffer a thousand years of torture at his hands.

“Tell me you can save him.” Thor says, his voice breaking. “Tell me he’ll live.”

Again, the healers fall silent. It's answer enough.

Thor feels like the air has been punched out of his lungs. The thought of losing Loki is *unbearable.* Loki, who is Thor's closest companion, confidante and lover. Loki, who is passionate and complex and sharp-tongued and full of vivacious energy. There is too much left unsaid, too much left to atone for. Thor couldn't forgive himself if Loki's last memory of this worldly realm was….well.

"There may be a way, " Freja offers quietly. "It is a longshot, but we have heard -"

"Anything," Thor breathes. "Anything. Name it, and I will have it done. Just save him. Please. Just….save him."

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[two weeks earlier]

"Laufey has finally taken a mate," Helblindi says. *And it could have been you.*

"How lovely. Of which clan?" Loki asks mildly, looking down at hand of cards. Helblindi is just trying to get a rise out of him with a quip like that, but Loki's not about to give him the satisfaction. It's not like Loki ever wanted to marry his own uncle anyway. Does Helblindi really expect him to be *jealous?*

"Farbauti, of clan Sturlungar."

“Prosperity and Fertility upon them,” Loki says automatically - the traditional Jotun benediction.

“Prosperity and Fertility.” Helblindi agrees.

Laufey shows his weakness in choosing Farbauti, Helblindi’s voice in Loki’s head continues. *He cannot control the warring factions on his own, without Clan Sturlungar’s help. His grasp on power is tenuous.*

Helblindi draws from the deck. “We hope a child will soon result.”

Laufey needs an heir. He’s desperate. He thinks this is the only way to hold onto the throne….but it is all in vain. Only the Casket will keep the peace.

“Children are a blessing,” Loki replies coolly, playing a card from his hand. It’s not like Helblindi ever tells him anything new and exciting. Every month with this same report: political strife, clan blood-feuds, unrest and hardship. Casket this, Casket that. Blah, blah.

It’s easy for Loki’s mind to drift while Helblindi is blabbering on and on. In Asgard there are hunting parties, feasts and festivals, balls and sport and all manner of gaiety. Jotunheim’s frozen wastes and petty conflicts feel…..very far away indeed.

“Ah, but it is good to see you. It has been far too long since I have had the pleasure of one of your visits. You were absent from court for nearly a month…..”

“I was ill,” Loki says without looking up from his cards, “But I am quite well now.”

Helblindi reaches for Loki’s hand from across the table, as to catch Loki’s attention - which he does. He assumes a very grave, heartfelt air, though his red eyes glisten with sadistic delight. Loki fights the urge to flinch.

“I hope you know you can come to me with your….bodily concerns. I realize it must be difficult to be a lone Jotun runtling amongst the Aesir. I myself had a runtling brother long ago; I have some experience with their physiology. I may be of some help.”

He’s making fun of him. Helblindi does love this little game they play.

“Was it a heat-sickness?” His mock-sincerity is nauseating. It’s moments like these when Loki wishes he had the magickal skill to be able to communicate telepathically, as Helblindi can. Having to hold his tongue and allow his brother to lecture at him, month after month, year after year, has been nothing short of torture.

“It was.”

“Your first?”

Loki’s jaw clenches only slightly. “Aye.”

Helblindi nods sympathetically.

I can still smell the heat-stink on you.

Helblindi pats his hand. “No need to be embarrassed, child. Happens to us all. Lucky you had someone to mate you through it. How did you find it?”

Loki’s entire face burns. Which, as a Jotun, is not exactly a natural sensation.

“Exhausting,” he says at last. It’s the least humiliating answer he can think of.

“Brace yourself, little one. Your first heat is never too intense - your body is still awakening and blossoming - so the next time will strike you with utmost force. I would advise you ask your master to lock you away. I know you are faithful to him, but one can never be too sure. They call it a ‘madness’ for a reason. You are sexually mature now. Who knows…..perhaps a child of your own will result. Would you like that?”

You took what I gave you, right? Before your heat?

“Yes,” Loki says, very slowly and deliberately, and Helblindi is visibly relieved.

Good. We cannot allow anything to distract you from your mission - especially not some half-blood brat. Not that Thor would want your bastard anyway.

"There is no greater fulfillment and honour for a runt than to bear its master's young. Especially when the sire is as august and esteemed as our King. Prosperity and fertility."

"Prosperity and fertility." Loki mutters.

I had worried that you would start your heats before completing your task. Heats tend to….complicate matters. But, upon reflection, I believe that this might in fact this might be the breakthrough we've been waiting for. I had a thought - Helblindi's smile grows ever more grotesque - *That now you and Thor are a mated pair…..*

Loki's eyes flit towards his chaperone. Helblindi must look like a lunatic grinning crazily for what would appear to be *no reason*. The chaperone glances briefly up from her needlework, her face unsuspecting, and Loki quickly averts his gaze back to his cards.

That means you're kin. Helblindi goes on. *You could attempt a Bridge.*

Whatever Loki thought he was going to say, it certainly wasn't that. A stone forms in his stomach.

"I *can't*…." Loki insists firmly, "".....play this round."

Helblindi narrows his red eyes just barely, and Loki fears he'll see right through him, just as easily as he projects his voice into Loki's mind.

"Are you sure?" Helblindi says.

"Yes. It is impossible." Loki replies calmly, because it's true. He's no telepath, not like Helblindi. He can't even respond to Helblindi mentally. How the Hel does Helblindi expect him to construct and maintain a Bridge?

Even if Loki could do it…..an invasion of that magnitude would not go without Thor's notice, surely. It sounds so…..intrusive. A violation. Loki couldn't - he couldn't do that to Thor.

Could he?

Yes, it would be impossible - I know the telepathic arts are not where your natural talents lie. Except, there are factors working in your favour. For better or worse, Thor is your mate now. He is your kin. You are are connected. Use his affection for you as a buttress for the Bridge.

"Perhaps you are not trying hard enough." Helblindi says aloud. There is a hard glint in his eye that, even after all this time, still makes Loki tense.

Thor must invite you into his mind - you cannot proceed without his consent. That is key, Loki: he must be the one let you in. But he trusts you, fool that he is. Have him volunteer some of his own private thoughts, wishes, desires, whatever. It matters not. Once inside, seek out his secrets. Secrets are all kept in one place, like a vault. If he shares but one, you will find them all.

"If only I had your skill," Loki says doubtfully.

Helblindi is unfazed. *Open your mind to him first. Let him in. Show him something...sentimental. This type of magic is unfamiliar to him. He trusts you. He will lower his defences. Men are weak.*

"Many great things can be accomplished with effort and dedication." Helblindi says, motioning to their game board. "Just. *Try*."

Loki huffs out through his nose and turns his attention back to his cards. It is immensely hard to focus on this stupid game, given the circumstances. He finally spots an appropriate play, and lays down one of his cards.

"See? Very good. I knew you could do it. But unfortunately for you…..that was precisely the card I needed." Helblindi says, placing his final card. His lips curl into a terrifying, triumphant smile. "I believe that means I've won."

Chapter End Notes

Chronologically, that last scene with helblindi came first, and this entire chapter takes place approximately 3 years after the events in chapter 11. Next chapter will pick up with Loki on death’s door. If it wasn't obvious, I do love me some whump!loki ^_^

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

The chapter that used to be here was moved to Chapter two of the Chrysalis!verse ficlets, so check it out there :)

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

We're back! With plot this time!

Thank you everyone for the well wishes and congrats! I had a wonderful wedding and honeymoon, but I'm glad to be back to real life now :)

Special shout out to curds_and_wheyface for meeting me in London! What a treat to finally meet one of my fav writers. She didn't let me pack her in my suitcase to take her home though (SELFISH). Nonetheless, she is a dream so this particular batch of melodramatic thorki schmoop is dedicated to her.

Apologies for any errors. I had….a lot of wine while proofreading this. Hope ya'll enjoy :))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Some would wonder, upon reading this tale, why it was that Loki-Consort, beloved of the King, attempted to Bridge with his master, His Majesty Thor of Asgard, the Splendid and Mighty.

Some might say, perhaps, it was out of loyalty to his native realm. But no - Loki never had much regard for the homeland which had so cruelly mistreated him.

Or, perhaps it was out of simmering hatred for the man who'd enslaved him and kept him as his thrall. This also was not so, for while Loki couldn't exactly say he was besotted with his master, neither could he say he hated him.

Or, perhaps, it was the allure of the riches which would have been heaped at his feet, were he to uncover the truth of the whereabouts of the Casket of Ancient Winters. This was the most absurd reason yet, for what riches could possibly be beyond his reach as Consort of the King of Asgard?

No, the reality of it was much more mundane. Loki would tell you, simply, that he'd Bridged with Thor because he was curious.

He hadn't known what to expect when he first crafted the spell. Unpracticed magic can be

unstable, at best. He'd found, to his surprise and delight, that the seidr actually came quite naturally to him. There were preexisting astral tendrils linking himself to Thor, though at the time Loki hadn't wanted to dwell on why this was so. It certainly made the Bridge's construction a straightforward affair. And as soon as it was formed, the rest was intuitive.

Thor was easily beguiled by the vision Loki presented him - a memory of Odin, which, while genuine, was certainly not selected without careful deliberation. Thor watched it unquestioningly. He had not the dexterity, nor the astuteness, nor the guile to try and uncover what lurked beneath its glossy surface. And Loki was glad for it, because he had a lot of secrets that needed keeping….

It was impossible to learn anything about Thor while Loki was hosting, but Loki made the most of his turns to show Thor this and that. Sweet sentimental nothings, mostly of Odin. Hopefully these would underscore the nature of his and Odin's relationship, and maybe lessen Thor's hatred for the old man a bit. These memories too needed considerable curation, however, for while he and Odin had never engaged in anything explicitly sexual, Loki can't say everything that transpired between them was entirely innocent, either. Seeing these memories in retrospect made Loki a little queasy. Back then, Loki had been so relieved to not have to bed Odin that he'd gratefully endured all Odin's caresses and lingering stares. He'd sat at Odin's feet like a dog and let the old man feed him sweets by hand….Thor had, at least, allowed him a measure of dignity.

Well, it wasn't like Loki could show him any memories of Jotunheim. Too many of these contained Helblindi, or Laufey, or the grand ice-palaces in which Loki spent his youth. Didn't exactly jive with the over-embellished sob story Loki had constructed to coax Thor to pity.

(No, Loki hadn't been born to poor fishermen and sold into slavery to pay off his dam's debt after his tragic demise at sea. Loki just had to get creative, didn't he? At least the part about having a greedy, conniving brother was true.)

The first Bridge hosted by Thor was altogether a different experience. Not knowing what to expect, Loki dutifully watched what was presented to him: memories of Thor as a youth, freckled and willful and brimming with hormones. Chasing girls, hunting down rabbits, tormenting the palace staff. Annoyingly capable of smooth-talking his way out of any caper. Overindulged in every possible respect. Sif had given him a bloody nose. He'd rightly deserved it.

Now, the the thing about Bridges, the thing that made Loki realize why Helblindi had been so insistent that Loki use them on Thor, is that Bridges are not exactly….solid. Bridges have perforations, seams - gaps where the host's memory is lacking. Their surfaces are smoothed over by intuition rather than by the recollection of precise detail. They are nothing but an illusion; much as an image projected on a screen, they have neither breadth nor substance. Their edges are hard to find, but the cracks are certainly there….if one knows where to look.

Thor had been showing him a memory of flying with Mjolnir at the time. It's not that it wasn't an exhilarating memory, or that Loki wasn't interested. It's just that...well. Thor must have more fascinating aspects to explore, surely…?

Loki couldn't help that he was curious.

By then, Loki had successfully carried out several Bridges with Thor, and he'd felt confident enough in his skill to try and look beyond what Thor was showing. Carefully, he scoped out the memory's edges - an undertaking which took far more patience than Loki knew Thor possessed. It was delicate, finicky work, and all the while he'd had to keep an eye on the unfolding memory, lest Thor suspect he wasn't really watching.

Loki truly hadn't expected it all to collapse. All he knew was that he'd been prodding, prodding, and in so doing he'd accidentally made a tear. The tear grew, split apart by forces unknown, as if the memory were an overfull sack of grain bursting at the seams. Then, everything began to fall apart.

"Focus," he remembers telling Thor. But it was too late; the memory was shattering. Falling away. Thor was no longer flying with Mjolnir. He was...he was…..

….Looking down at Loki.

Or rather, Loki was looking down at himself from what was certainly Thor's point of view. He could never have imagined how truly pathetic he'd looked, crying and cowering on the floor like that, until he witnessed it for himself first-hand. Loki had never felt so humiliated, before or since. And that's saying something, considering that Loki's entire life had been something of a long string of humiliating, awful experiences. Reliving it from Thor's perspective was nothing short of torture.

But, because he was in Thor's memory, Loki had no choice but to watch. And this time, he hadn't the wherewithal to try and look away.

Loki reached down towards himself, only to have past-Loki flinch away in terror, his beautiful eyes wide and frightened and brimming with tears.

Loki-as-Thor retracted his hand, horrified. They were all staring at him, judging him, like they knew the terrible thing he'd done. This was all his fault. Why couldn't he control himself?

He couldn't keep living like this, as a creature of base impulse and cruelty. To have done this to the only being he truly cared about? What kind of king would that make him? What kind of man? He would never be beloved by his people were he to continue down this path. He knew he had to change, though in truth he had no idea how or even where to begin…..

All at once, Loki was snapped back to his own consciousness. He was appalled at himself for doing this to Thor, his mate, whom he hadn't chosen but nonetheless had come to care for. This man, whose future was linked to Loki's in ways Loki was only just beginning to understand. Thor had trusted him, and in return Loki had given him betrayal.

Loki just couldn't do it. He'd have to tell Helblindi it was impossible. He'd say that the Bridge failed or - or that he couldn't get the magic to work in the first place.

No, he'll not seek out the Casket in this manner. Nor any other of Thor's secrets. There must be another way.

***

Loki comes to consciousness murkily. The first thing that registers is the ache of stiff muscles and the throbbing within his head. Slowly he becomes aware of muffled voices milling about him, though he can't make out what they're saying. There's a soft, familiar purr all around him. It reminds him of home.

Loki's eyes open a slit.

"Majesty, he wakes!" comes the squeal of some female voice. Then heavy footsteps draw near.

Thor's face, blurry at first, comes slowly into focus. Thor is staring at him wide-eyed, and he recoils slightly when Loki blinks up at him. He recovers quickly, however, and his lips melt into a tight smile.

"Hello, Loki," he says. His hand hovers hesitantly over Loki's forehead for a moment, before he finally lays it down. It feels too hot but Loki welcomes it anyway.

"Thor," Loki sighs.

It’s difficult to place where he is, at first, though slowly he comes to recognize that he’s in the imperial bedroom. He finds he has no idea how long he’d been unconscious, nor does he know what time of day it is. Or even, *what* day it is. He can’t recall his last waking moments. His dreams had been so vivid and disorienting…..

Bits of memory come back to Loki in patches: the mad fervor of his heat, the visit to the lake, the disastrous Bridge. The feast.

“I’m…” Loki croaks.

Blue.

It’s then Loki realizes what Thor had been startled by: his natural red eyes. Thor had never seen them before.

“I’m blue,” Loki says, feeling feverish. “I’m blue.”

Thor just nods with a tense press of his lips. “Yes. It…..happened as soon as we brought it in.”

At the foot of the bed, the source of the gentle hum, is the Casket of Ancient Winters. Just...sitting there, within arm’s reach.

Thor follows Loki’s gaze. “It was the only way I could save you. It brought you back to me.” He cups Loki’s cheek. “I thought I’d lost you.”

Loki’s heart races, a tidal wave of panic overcoming him. If he’s in his Jotunn form, his once hidden heritage lines must now be visible…..the same heritage lines that demarcate him as Helblindi’s brother.

Blood is rushing in his ears. He sits up abruptly, which, by the sudden flush of dizziness, proves to be a mistake.

“Shh, rest,” Thor says, easing Loki back. “You are still very weak. You must rest.”

Loki tries to calm himself. There is no trace of recognition in Thor’s eyes. He can’t read the patterns and swirls as a Jotunn could.

“I’ve never seen you like this,” Thor comments lightheartedly, still trying to smile even though he clearly doesn’t know what to make of Loki. The uncertainty rounds the hard edges of his face and makes him look much younger than his years. “It’s….different.”

“I…..” Loki starts, licking his dry lips. “May I have a glass of water?”

Thor nods and hands him a cool glass from the nightstand, and helps Loki sit up somewhat to drink. Loki accepts the glass shakily, and can only manage a few sips. The Casket taunts him from the end of the bed, pulsing its ancestral magic.

“How do you feel?” Thor asks softly, taking the cup after Loki has finished and petting Loki’s hair.

Loki lets out a huff of a laugh. There isn’t a word in any language Loki knows that can describe what he’s feeling.

“Tired,” Loki says at last.

“You almost died. I was so worried.”

Were you? Loki wants to ask. *Tell me how much.*

“Loki, it pains me to tell you this, but we have cause to believe you were poisoned at the feast. And….” Thor looks even more uncomfortable. “That the poison was targeted to you specifically.”

This bit of information hits Loki dully.

“Oh,” Loki says.

“I am still having the matter investigated,” Thor adds quickly. “We are yet unsure of who is behind this. But the perpetrators will be found. And you will have justice.”

It’s all Loki can do to just nod, glancing blearily at the Casket. He simply can’t bring himself to believe it is *here*, practically at his fingertips: The very thing Loki’s been obsessed with since embarking on this mission. The salvation of Jotunheim, and Loki’s ticket to freedom.

Loki looks back at Thor, then down to where he’s just noticed Thor’s hand is interlaced with his own. Golden-tan skin against blue.

You fool, Loki thinks sadly. *You stupid sentimental fool.*

What have you done?

***

Loki’s recovery takes place in gradual increments. He spends most of his nights listlessly tossing about in bed, and, exhausted, finally finds sleep at daybreak. They keep the Casket near at hand, for it’s what the healers agree is best for Loki’s health. Loki can’t bring himself to draw near it. He’s unsure of what he might do.

Seeing his blue skin again is odd and takes some getting used to. He’d almost forgotten what he’d looked like in his natural state. But the changes are not just aesthetic: his hearing and sense of smell is sharper, and his vision is much better able to make out shapes in the dark of night. He’s just as he was before he’d been bleached by Helblindi’s sorcerers. If Loki thought of himself as something of an outsider before, it’s nothing compared to the way he now sticks out amongst the pale-faced Aesir. His attendants, who’d served him dutifully for the past three years, stare at him like a strange, exotic curiosity. Which, Loki supposes he is.

All the while, Loki is hyperaware of his treacherous heritage lines. They used to be a source of great pride for him back home, where family ties and kin are everything. If Loki had been mated to Laufey, their children’s heritage lines would’ve read as almost purely royal, given that Loki himself is of royal stock. Even though Loki had no desire to have borne children for his uncle - blegh - there was a certain thrill in picturing one’s young bearing such fine, regal lines, unmarred by common blood. Loki used to be greatly admired for his own elegant lines, which linked him not only to the royal house of Jotunheim but also to his sire's kin, and to the many generations of Jotnar nobility on that side of his family. In fact, his lines were once Loki’s greatest asset - aside from, of

course, his blood and fortune. How ironic that now he wants nothing more than to hide them away.

Loki has never been so thankful for the Aesir's obliviousness when it comes to Jotunn culture. It would be so obvious to any Frost Giant that he and Helblindi are brothers.

As it turns out, even the Casket's transformative power has its limits. Loki soon learns that by moving far enough away from it, his skin will revert to its bleached state. Not having his lines exposed eases Loki's anxieties, and so he's the first to suggest that they move the Casket out of the Imperial bedroom to an adjoining room for safekeeping. His healers seem to find this an odd request, but they humor him. And yet, even from the other room, he can hear the damn thing calling to him….as if it knows what his intentions are here in Asgard. It wants to go home.

Thor hovers obsessively over Loki, equal parts concern and bewilderment. It's funny to watch him pace around in a fret. No doubt the hunt for Loki's would-be assassin has him on edge, and Loki knows he must be frothing at the mouth to wreck his revenge. He seems relieved to have the old, pale-faced Loki back, though. Loki's not sure why that stings as much as it does.

In the dark of night, unable to sleep, Loki slips away from his and Thor's shared bed. He can't resist its call any longer. He has to see it up close. Upon drawing near, a cool frisson overcomes him, and once more he's in his Jotun skin.

Loki's fingertips skim reverently across the surface of the Casket, its energy singing beneath his azure skin, calling to him, awakening in him a longing for his homeland. Its elemental magic is undeniable and truly awe-inspiring. Loki can see why so many lives have been sacrificed in its name. In the right hands, its power is *limitless.* It's funny -Loki always imagined it would be bigger.

And that's when he feels it: the smallest flutter in his belly, so faint Loki almost thinks it's his imagination. Confirming what he'd already begun to suspect.

Loki retracts his hand, then laughs darkly. No contraceptive in the world is effective against a runt in heat and a fertility god.

"Loki?"

Loki startles, whirling around to find Thor in the door frame clad in his nighttime robe and looking pleasantly rumpled. Loki's heart pounds in his chest, much like a child who's been caught stealing

sweets in the dark of night.

“You should be resting.”

“I….” Loki licks his lips, clutching his own night robe tight around his stomach. “I just wanted to see it up close…”

Thor nods, coming closer, his face utterly unsuspecting. There’s a bit of hesitation in his step, as though he isn’t sure how to treat Loki now that he’s in his natural Jotun form.

“Does it help? Having it here?”

“Yes,” Loki answers cautiously, because it does, in ways Loki cannot articulate. Its restorative power is undeniable - enough to override Loki’s bleaching. Enough to cleanse his body of poison, and to strengthen the little being growing inside.

Thor chuckles. “To tell you the truth, I forgot I had it.”

A wave of bitterness crests over Loki, but he suppresses it just as quickly.

“I never thought I’d ever see it,” Loki confesses, and it’s the truth.

“Yes, we keep it secured away safely, hidden deep inside the moon of Dunyr. It is a very powerful artifact, and no doubt there are many who would try to acquire it for their own nefarious use.”

Loki just stares. He can’t believe Thor’s just told him that outright - offering that information up carelessly as though it were *nothing.*

“Yes,” Loki eventually says, when the silence drags on a little too long and Thor looks like he’s expecting an answer. Then, in a smaller voice he adds, “Was it really wise to bring it here?”

“I had to save you,” Thor says simply.

Loki exhales shakily, half a laugh and half a sob. He feels like he could cry.

Thor clears his throat, uncomfortable as ever in the face of Loki's tears, and turns to leave. "Alright. Well... come back to bed when you are ready."

"Thor?"

Thor stops, turning to face Loki from the doorway.

"Who was it that told you the Casket would heal me?"

"Ambassador Helblindi," Thor says, then shoots Loki a rueful smile. "I suppose he turned out to be useful after all."

Loki nods, and Thor departs, leaving Loki alone with the Casket of Ancient Winters.

Ambassador Helblindi, Loki thinks tiredly.

Of course.

***

Loki rolls his shoulders back and stands to his full height, his hand clutched tightly around the handle of his cane. He hadn't wanted to use it today, but Thor had insisted. Sometimes, he could really do without Thor's coddling. He's not an invalid. And he doesn't like the way people whisper when he's made to use it - like they are all keen to recall Loki's little *accident.* The only thing that gives Loki some solace is knowing Thor had paid an unseemly amount for the emeralds in the handle.

Helblindi bows deeply at the foot of the dias of the audience chamber. Looking down at him from above doesn't feel as gratifying as it usually does.

“His Majesty the King tells me I have you to thank for saving my life. For that you have my sincerest gratitude.” Loki says in a rush. "It was because of your counsel I was able to stave off certain death.”

Helblindi’s eyes twinkle malevolently, like he knows Loki had lied to him about not being able to form a Bridge. They had not parted on good terms when last they met. The lies aren’t coming out so easily these days.

“It is an honour to be of service, even in just that small way. I am relieved to see you have recovered, Consort Loki.”

Recovered isn’t exactly the word Loki would use. He’s survived an assassination attempt, held the Casket of Ancient Winters in his very hands, and found he’s been knocked up by the King of Asgard. It’s been….quite the week.

“Yes,” is Loki’s flat response. “Thanks as well to the care and attention of His Majesty and his healers, to whom I owe an infinite debt.”

“They are saying it was an assassination attempt - how despicable. Poison is a coward’s tool.”

“I have many enemies,” Loki says coolly.

“Such is the burden of being the favourite of the King,” Helblindi says in that lofty, pretentious way of his. Smarmy bastard. “One who is so firmly ensconced in the king’s affections will always be the target of jealousy. Have you any idea who has committed this dastardly deed?”

In truth, Loki can’t help but feel like the investigation is going much, much too fast, spurred into overdrive by Thor’s voracious appetite for vengeance.There are suspects, but the evidence against them is, in Loki’s opinion, rather paltry and circumstantial. Loki isn’t about to tell Helblindi *that.*

“His Majesty’s spies say that the assassin was likely among the party from Vanaheim. They have been detained for further questioning.”

“Mmmm. No doubt in retaliation for the deposition of lady Amora.”

"*Mmmm,"* Loki mimics. As if he needed to be reminded.

"I've no doubt His Majesty's justice will be both swift and exacting. That is the only thing that gives me a semblance of comfort in these dark times, for I regret to inform you that I must depart for Jotunheim at sunrise tomorrow morning."

This genuinely surprises Loki. He thought he'd never be rid of Helblindi - let alone *now,* when so much is coming to a head…?

Helblindi goes on, "Though it pains me to leave your side at this critical moment, the climate here on Asgard has grown tense in light of recent events, and so I have been called back to Laufey-King's court."

"Oh," Loki says, baffled. "I am...sorry to hear that, Ambassador."

But then Helblindi's voice in his head explains: *I am returning to Jotunheim to open the wormhole for you. I know that the Casket is still in Asgard, I can hear its call even as we speak. Bring it to me, and I will protect you from Thor's wrath. With the Casket in Laufey's hands, you will be safe. Thor will never violate you again.*

*"*No one is more sorry than I," Helblindi oozes. "But I have little doubt His Majesty will root out the perpetrators of this vile crime, and make them pay tenfold. Keep close to your master, for he shall protect and avenge you."

Helblindi makes a show of approaching the dias, and places a kiss on Loki's hand.

*"*Farewell Consort Loki - until we meet again. Prosperity and Fertility."

You have no excuses left.

***

Loki can't eat. The sight of food makes him feel ill, and he's not sure if it's because of stress or because of his…..condition. He pushes his food around his plate aimlessly, even though it's his

favourite - fish and crab torte - and Thor had probably ordered it to stimulate Loki's appetite.

"Is it not to your taste?"

"I have not much stomach lately," Loki mumbles. Out of habit he reaches for his wine glass, but realizes at once that he probably shouldn't be drinking. But then, if he's going to get rid of it anyway, does it really matter?

Noting the worry on Thor's face, Loki smiles and assures him, "I'm just still recovering. No need to worry."

Thor looks unconvinced. "Did you like your new brooch?"

"I did, thank you," answers Loki. He hasn't the energy to go into fawning specifics about the beauty of the opals or the fine platinum filigree work. Not that it isn't a beautiful piece - whoever Thor has selecting his gifts for him has exquisite taste. It's just that Loki is so...tired.

Loki's non-responsiveness perturbs Thor, which is why his gift-giving has become more generous of late: jewels and furs and silk, adding to Loki's already ample collection. It's something Thor does when he isn't sure how to handle Loki's moods. Loki usually delights in being spoiled but he's too preoccupied to take much pleasure in anything right now. Thor's chief means of problem-solving is throwing either money or brute force at them.

Which seems to be why he tries something altogether unheard of, for him: *talking*.

Thor takes a knee at Loki's feet.

"I'm sorry." he says.

Loki just stares. "For what?"

"For not protecting you," Thor says. "For not taking your misgivings seriously."

Loki blinks. Thor has never, ever apologized to him before. For anything.

“I will root out those who did this to you and make them pay. They will beg for death before I am through with them. That is my vow to you, Loki….”

Loki can’t think of anything to say to that. The fact of his poisoning is something of an afterthought; vengeance isn’t exactly the first thing on his mind these days.

"Alright,” Loki says.

Thor’s brow furrows. Evidently this wasn’t the response he was expecting. “Alright?”

“Thank you,” Loki tries instead.

Thor chews his lip. “Whatever punishment you see fit to enact, I will have it done. I would do it myself.”

Loki nods blearily. Ah yes, back to bashing away one’s problems with a hammer.

But Gods help him, Loki is thawed a little bit by Thor’s clumsy attempt at appeasement. He *is* trying, in his own Thor-specific way. Loki kisses him half to shut him up and half because he wants to. It works well enough, and Thor eagerly reciprocates. It’s easier than having to say something, anyway.

***

“How are you feeling?” Thor asks, sometime later, as they are preparing for bed.

“Fine,” Loki answers absently as he combs through his hair, checking his brush for strands as he does so. He read once that Aesir women don’t shed their hair while they’re pregnant, and that they lose it in big clumps after giving birth - something to do with all the prenatal and postnatal hormones. Loki remembers going through puberty and wanting so badly for his hair to shed. When it didn’t, everyone knew for certain that Loki’s smaller-than-average frame wasn’t just a fluke - that he was, in fact, a runt. And Loki, bereft, had wept for the horns he’d never grow and the

victories in battle he'd never claim.

After being in Asgard for so long, Loki now thinks he'd be horrified if all his hair fell out.

(The look on Thor's face, though…!)

" *Fine* fine?" Thor asks. "Or…"

The word trails off into silence. Loki looks up at him through his vanity mirror. Thor is fidgety in his nighttime slippers, and his fingers tap restlessly on a nearby table. It becomes all-too apparent what he's really asking. Loki has been either ill or recovering for the last two and a half weeks; that's a long time to ask someone like Thor to go without sex.

It's funny that he's so tentative, though. It's unlike him and almost endearing.

By now Loki's heat has completely worn off and he's absolutely not in the mood, but he's willing to go along with it to please his master. The fact that Thor desires him still is not something to be taken for granted. There'd be long line of willing bedmates eager to take his place should Loki ever turn him away.

"Quite fine," Loki assures him, setting down his brush and beckoning to Thor with his best sultry smile. Thor comes gladly, like a happy dog, and envelops Loki in a firm embrace. They kiss and it's nice, sweet even. Thor takes his time, and is delicate in his handling of Loki, except for the odd time when his hips buck impatiently against Loki's. Thor likes to fuck and he likes to fuck rough, and Loki appreciates that he's trying to hold himself back. His kisses are sweet, though. He's a much better kisser than he used to be. Less bitey.

Loki is just starting to get into it when Thor breaks away.

"I was wondering if you would let me fuck you..."

"You really needn't ask," Loki chuckles. Isn't that what they were in the process of doing anyway? And besides, it's not like Loki would ever say no.

"....In your Jotunn form," Thor finishes.

Oh.

Oh.

Loki, for a moment, is at a loss. He'd been certain Thor found his Jotunn colouring ugly. Monstrous. Or at least, distasteful.

Thor's eyes are bright and hopeful. Loki can't think of a good reason to refuse.

"Uh, alright," Loki eventually stammers, and Thor smiles broadly and presses a firm kiss to his lips.

In short order Thor returns with the Casket, watching with rapt amazement as Loki's skin reverts to its natural hue. Though the transformation is pleasurable Loki feels naked without his pale skin, doubly so now that his heritage lines are once again exposed. Though Loki knows Thor can't read his heritage lines, the fear that Thor will spot some flourish that reminds him of Helblindi is insuppressible. All Loki's lies, made tangible on his very face…

Loki ducks his head in hopes of passing off his apprehension as modesty, though it can't be convincing. He'd long since cast off any semblance of virginal shyness. Thor gently grips Loki by the chin, inspecting Loki's Jotunn face, tilting his head to and fro to catch the light.

"You look so different," Thor comments, thoughtful. "And yet the same."

Thor's hands skim up to Loki's shoulders, where he unlocks the clasps on Loki's dress. Loki allows this placidly, neither helping nor pulling away. Whether or not Thor likes what he sees is still an open question. Right now Loki looks every bit the Frost Giant so many Asgardians mistrust and despise. The fact of Loki's race was never any secret, but it was never made so terribly ostentatious either.

The material flutters away, leaving Loki nude, and Thor is fascinated. He traces the lines down Loki's chest and over a purplish-hued nipple, making Loki shudder. The novelty of Loki's blue skin must intrigue him, though Loki hopes not in a weird sexual way. The last thing Loki needs right now is for Thor to discover a new fetish.

“You’re beautiful,” Thor tells him.

Again, not what Loki was expecting. He knows that back on Jotunheim he’d be considered a great beauty, though he didn’t think Thor would think so.

“Thank you,” he mumbles.

“I’ve never seen a Frost Giant that looks like you.”

Loki frowns. No, he wouldn’t have. Loki’s kind don’t exactly parade their runts around in front of foreigners. The only scenario in which Loki could see a runt like him encountering Thor is if he were presented to him as spoils of war.

Thor’s hands skim lower and begin to rub at Loki.

“I can see why one such as you would be so highly prized.” Thor breathes. “Your skin is as cool and smooth as marble…”

He’s turned on by this, Loki realizes, stupefied. *He likes this.*

Then, an even more ludicrous notion: *I’m about to be fucked in the presence of my people’s most holy relic.*

“You’re so shy,” Thor comments, and Loki has to hold back a snort. Given the circumstances, he isn’t exactly in the mood to play sex kitten tonight.

“I just find it strange to be in this form again,” Loki says, hoping that will distract Thor from the fact that he’s not at all becoming aroused by his ministrations. “I was told the Aesir wouldn’t find it….appealing. That’s why I was bleached.”

“Who told you that?”

Loki chews his lip, considering whether to lie, but settles on the truth: “My brother. Before he sold me.”

Thor’s face darkens. “Well, he was wrong. I like you in whatever form you take.”

Loki wonders just how much Thor means that, because unless Loki takes quick action, soon enough he’ll start to swell and grow heavy with child, and his form will take on quite a new shape indeed. He’s already starting to feel puffy, and in a few weeks his silk dresses will be too tight to wear.

Helblindi always said Thor wouldn't want a child who is half Jotunn, even if it is by Loki. Why would he? Loki is not his queen, and though their child would be royal it would not be legitimate. Loki isn’t even sure what color it would be. Blue - Loki’s natural color - or pale? Or greyish? Would it have heritage lines, linking it to Loki’s ancestral house? To Thor’s?

Despite this, Loki feels strangely attached to it. It represents the merging of two royal bloodlines, after all - even if half of its lineage must remain a secret. But more importantly, this child would be naturally gifted in seidr, likely even outmatching Loki’s own magical endowments. Loki had long thought his and Thor’s magics were complementary. Diametric, yes, but operating in harmony. It would be fascinating to see whether these two streams of seidr could coexist in one being. Imagine, Thor’s raw power with Loki’s razor-like precision. Loki could teach the child to hone its natural gifts, and become skilled in the arts of illusion and destruction. Such a being would truly be worthy of sitting upon the throne of Asgard!

Idle fantasies, really. Loki’s child would never inherit the throne. And, being born of a slave, it would also inherit Loki’s status. It might be doted on, even loved by its father, but that doesn’t change the fact that it could be discarded on a whim should Thor’s future queen will it.

Still, it would be a shame to be rid of it.

Abruptly, Loki is snapped back to reality as Thor inserts two fingers in his cunt. As if on autopilot, Loki takes Thor’cock in hand and begins stroking him. Best to get on with it.

Thor must’ve been more worked up than Loki imagined, because it only takes a few strokes before he’s had enough foreplay and is ready to move onto the main event. Loki lays back on the bed as he is prompted and obediently parts his thighs in invitation. Thor is on him at once, and thankfully doesn’t seem to notice Loki’s lack of interest. Thor’s cock juts out proudly, as if it knew that it had created Loki’s present predicament. Thor slings one of Loki’s long legs over his shoulder as they begin to fuck, and, not for the first time, Loki is surprised to see his blue skin contrasted against

Thor's fair colouring.

Loki muses that this is the first time he *should've* had, when he and Thor had first fucked some three years before. Here, in Thor's bed, in Loki's natural form.

This entire situation so profoundly outrageous that Loki finds it impossible to become aroused, let alone come. Thor, however, is having the time of his life, pumping in and out of Loki's pliant body and panting Loki's name hotly against his neck. Loki wishes he'd just hurry up and finish. He does his best to encourage Thor to this end, mostly by locking his legs around Thor's waist and undulating his hips upwards to meet Thor's thrusts. By now Thor's forgotten to be gentle, and he drives his cock hard up into Loki, jerking him forwards every time. Having been Thor's concubine for so long, Loki's grown used to Thor's rough handling. Vaguely, he remembers how much he'd enjoyed it during his heat. Loki welcomes it again now, because he knows it means Thor will soon climax.

Thor does, spectacularly, and after riding out the rest of his orgasm, he goes limp as a fish atop Loki's smaller frame. His skin is so damned hot, Loki can hardly believe there was a time when he didn't find it unbearable to be pressed so tightly against him. It's *smothering*. Mercifully, Thor soon rolls off, shooting Loki a loopy grin, and is asleep shortly thereafter.

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Loki doesn't sleep. It's hard to relax with that *thing* still in here, throbbing its primordial energy. Loki peels Thor's arm off him and slinks out of bed, as if drawn by the tug of invisible strings. The Casket is singing to him, singing.

It would be so easy to take it and run.

Loki needs only to summon a wormhole and have Helblindi bring him through to the other side. In just a few minutes and he could be home, where his fortune and his freedom await. He could slip away hours before anyone would realize he's missing. He could be so deep in Jotunheim by morning he may as well have fallen off the Rainbow Bridge.

Loki imagines Thor waking to find him gone….to find the *Casket* gone. Thor is not a stupid man, he would certainly but two and two together. A Jotunn runtling who disappears the same night as the Casket of Ancient Winters? It's laughable that Thor would leave the Casket alone with someone like Loki - a slave of an enemy race, and a witch at that.

It'd be what he deserves, after all, for the way he's treated Loki in the past. Loki may be Thor's consort but he's still technically a slave. Thor has never officially freed him, nor has he made any indication that he ever would. And Thor would certainly never marry him. In fact, it's becoming more and more obvious that if he stays in Asgard, Loki will soon see Thor married to someone else. Thor has no other option if he's to sire a legitimate heir. And so long as Loki's true royal lineage remains a secret - which it has to, indefinitely - Loki will never be Thor's queen.

All these things rouse feelings of bitterness in Loki. Thor is difficult. Other times he's oblivious. And sometimes he's downright mean. Loki could easily picture him throwing a temper tantrum at Loki's escape, cursing and seething and carrying-on like the brat he is, trashing their shared apartment, and vowing revenge on his betrayer. He certainly would come after Loki, maybe even start a war, though he would not get far with the Casket in Laufey's hands.

The thought is almost satisfying. That for once in Thor's life, he wouldn't be able to get what he wants. That he would finally realize Loki is no slave, not his property. That Loki is not his to control.

But.

If he's being honest with himself, Loki doesn't truly think that's what would happen. What Loki believes, deep down, is that in running away, he would break Thor's heart.

Loki quickly glances back at Thor, still sleeping in their shared bed, blissfully unaware. Thor: his lover, his mate. His *owner,* and the father of his child.

Thor is difficult, it's true. He frustrates Loki all the time. He occasionally forgets himself and orders Loki like a servant; accustomed, as he is, to always getting his way. He has a limitless sexual appetite, and he gets demanding and grabby when he's drunk.

It takes all of Loki's patience to deal with him, so much so that it's often hard to restrain himself from blasting Thor with a bolt of magic.

But he *does* try to be better, Loki has to concede. He's never struck Loki, which is more than Loki can say about Helblindi. Thor doesn't mistreat him or purposefully belittle him. He's easy enough to bring to heel (Bit of exaggerated hobbling on his ankle usually does the trick). He's granted Loki the trappings of respectability. Gone are the days when Loki was made to parade himself about in skimpy costumes for the titillation of the court. He sits at Thor's side - not stands as an attendant would, nor does he kneel as would a slave.

Most incredibly, to Loki's knowledge, Thor doesn't sleep around behind his back. Thor has every opportunity to fuck whomever he wants, however he wants, and there wouldn't be a single thing Loki could do about it. Loki hardly expected Thor to be faithful to him for a single year, let alone three. Since becoming Consort, Loki has been bracing himself for the inevitable whispers that Thor was getting his fill of ass on the side. But to his shock, such rumors never materialized.

Indeed, Thor must care about him - enough to be faithful, even. Enough to let Loki sleep in his bed in the place of a true queen. Enough to turn down alliance after alliance so that Loki wouldn't have to watch him be wed to someone else. He'd committed to being a better man on Loki's account. Loki had seen it himself from within Thor's memory. And here Loki is, contemplating betrayal.

Loki sniffs, wiping the back of his eyes with the sleeve of his robe. He can't pinpoint when things got so damn messy. He remembers a time when being alone with the Casket would bring nothing but pure gleeful elation. But now that Loki's faced with it, all he feels is misery.

Then, as if things could be any more complicated, there's the little matter of...well.

Loki had resigned himself to the fact that at some point, he'd have to bear his master's offspring. Whether it was Laufey, or Ulfr, or whoever Helblindi selected for him, it really wouldn't have mattered. But, that was predicated on the fact that his master would *want* children by Loki. With Thor, Loki is not so sure. A child will complicate things. And it won't endear him to Thor: Thor has bastards by other women, estranged after Thor had fallen out with their mothers. Though Loki knows they receive yearly stipends for their upkeep, it doesn't change the fact that Thor had exiled them to make way for Loki.

Thor will reject the child. Thor might even tell Loki to get rid of it before it starts to plump up Loki's otherwise trim figure. He'll have no use for a child by Loki. It will interfere with Loki's ability to satisfy Thor sexually. It will make Loki fat and unattractive, and loosen him up so he isn't as tight a fuck as before. Thor will get mad, probably, that Loki didn't take proper care to keep this from happening in the first place. Thor wouldn't care about heritage lines or diametric magics.

The more Loki tells himself this the more he begins to believe it. That way, when Thor flies into a rage at the news, Loki won't be able to say he's surprised. It will confirm every awful thing Loki has ever believed of him. It's the only way Loki can picture himself leaving.

Loki lets out a shaky breath. That's it, then. He'll tell Thor, and after the inevitable ensuing fight, Loki will take off with the Casket and start his life fresh, far away from Asgard and its heartless King. Loki could then spend the rest of his life on his isolated estate. He couldn't possibly keep the child - he'd have to leave it out on the cliffs to die. But, such would be the cost of severing his ties

to Asgard. Loki's kind do it all the time to rid themselves of weak, sickly, or burdensome younglings.

Loki could then set about outfitting a proper library, practising his magic and becoming a formidable seidr-wielder. He'd hide himself away, so no one could ever hurt him again. He'd be free of Helblindi, and of Thor. Just as he always wanted. And that will be that….

Yes.

That will be that.

Loki peels himself away from the Casket and pads back to bed, where Thor is still peacefully snoring. He climbs back in and settles into the downy mattress. Sleep, however, never comes.

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Telling Thor proves easier said than done. Not helping is the way Thor thunders into their shared apartments at night, his countenance stormy and his hand tightening around Mjolnir's handle as if in anticipation of meteing out vengeance at any moment. The investigations into the assassination are going nowhere, and Loki can tell he's getting frustrated. His obsessiveness quickly becomes tiresome, to the point that Loki begins to tune out anytime he talks about it.

At least Thor is easy enough to distract. All it takes is a temptingly cocked hip or strategic bit of exposed flesh. Loki's still too preoccupied to get off on the sex that results (for the most part) but it has the blessed effect of shutting Thor up and putting him to sleep afterward.

In the afterglow of these sessions, Loki considers saying it. He envisions the words slipping off his tongue, though he agonizes over the best way to phrase it:

Thor, I am pregnant.

Thor, I think I am pregnant.

I am carrying your child...

Thor, you brainless oaf, you knocked me up during my heat. Thanks a lot.

But by the time Loki has worked up the nerve to go through with it, Thor is asleep and snoring.

The days tick by with Loki stuck in limbo. He hems and haws and dawdles, waiting for just the right time, the perfect moment, when in reality Loki knows he's procrastinating because he fears what Thor might say.

It's on a sunny midday that Loki is suddenly (and unpleasantly) spurred into action. The servants bring his lunch to him at around noon, as is usual. But as soon as they pull the cloche off the food platter, the gamey smell of venison is so decidedly unappealing that Loki knows he's going to hurl - this time, for reasons entirely unrelated to being poisoned.

With an impressive amount of calm, Loki excuses himself and makes haste towards his private washroom, where he then proceeds to throw up his previously consumed breakfast of tea, eggs and fruit.

"Damn," Loki says, spitting out a wad of gooey bile. Nothing drives reality home quite like that first bout of morning sickness. And here he'd been hoping he'd be free of such a cursed affliction. Fate has chosen not to be kind to him, even in this.

He's running out of time. His chest is achey and sore, and Loki thinks he's already put on weight. Soon his symptoms will become so obvious the palace healers will be sicced on him, and his secret will be revealed without Loki having the chance to tell Thor himself.

That won't do. Loki will just have to think of a way to work up the courage, without (regrettably) the aid of alcohol. Sigh.

***

Loki finds Thor in his private study. It's a happy coincidence, for Loki knows Thor usually likes to spend time in there alone, without his usual cohort of attendants and courtiers.

"Thor, I…."

Loki freezes at the door. Thor is most certainly not alone.

Loki struggles to place the man who looms over Thor's shoulder. He seems so... familiar. The man is deathly pale, with a gaunt, greenish hue to his skin, and beady eyes that immediately lock onto Loki's. It dawns on Loki all at once: this is the gaoler from the Underground, whom Loki had met on the eve of Thor's Coronation.

For a brief, nonsensical moment, Loki panics: *He's come for me.* Loki has never shaken the worry that his real secret will be exposed - the one that would truly damn him. Quickly Loki checks Thor's face, and is relieved to find that this probably isn't the case. At times like these, Loki thinks his past will haunt him until the end of his days.

Thor looks up at him from where he'd been hunched over some important-looking documents. He sits back, his lips pulling into a grim smile.

"Hello Lokes," he says, the endearment incongruous will the overwhelming tension in the room.

"My King," Loki responds with a slight bow, having unconsciously shifted into *good behaviour* mode under the gaoler's scrutiny. "Am I interrupting?"

"Not at all, we are finished." Though Thor's gaze softens when he looks at Loki, the steely resolve in his eyes sends a terrible chill down Loki's spine. "This is my Imperial Gaoler," he says, as if Loki didn't already know that.

The man bows his head in acknowledgement. "Consort Loki."

Loki stiffens at the mocking gleam in the gaoler's eye. He remembers Loki too.

Something about all this just seems...off.

"What's he doing here?"

“Do not trouble yourself, my pet. We are through.” Thor waves the man off. The gaoler collects the documents, bows deeply, and leaves.

“This is about…” Loki starts, but it’s obvious enough. “You’re holding the Vanir prisoners Underground?”

“I said, don’t trouble yourself. It doesn’t involve you.”

Loki immediately resents his patronizing tone. “The crime was perpetrated against my person,” he insists. “I think it involves me.”

Thor makes a non-committal noise. His evasiveness is making Loki uneasy. Thor was never good at being deceitful.

Loki tries again: “What are you going to do?”

“I am going to get to root out the perpetrators. As I said I would.”

“By what means? Interrogation?” Loki says. *Torture?* - he thinks, but has not the nerve to say aloud. Loki knows that such extremes are not off limits even in oh-so civilized Asgard. He’d heard the screams for himself that night Underground...

Thor shoots him a look. “You’re awfully concerned with your prospective murderers’ well-being.”

“There is not enough evidence to call them that. Thor, I can’t explain why, but have the suspicion that the Vanir prisoners are not the culprits you seek. I simply can’t believe they would undertake such a crime at their own banquet, jeopardizing the peace they’ve fought for so long to establish.”

Thor just shrugs, taking his tankard in hand. “We’ll see,” he mutters into his ale.

Loki studies Thor carefully. The uneasy feeling intensifies.

“What do you mean *we’ll see?* Thor, what do you mean to do?”

Thor's countenance changes then. He affixes his gaze on Loki: a look so utterly devoid of compassion that Loki's blood turns cold.

"I am going to get a confession. And if none of them will give me one, the lot will be executed for treason against Asgard."

"Thor," Loki breathes "*No.*"

Thor just grumbles and takes a swig of ale. "I knew you'd be upset."

"Those Vanir are guests in our Realm," Loki stammers. "I understand your need to uncover the poisoner's plot and exact vengeance, but to resort to such extreme tactics? Thor, you are letting your rage cloud your judgement."

"The order has been signed; it is done. It's not your place to question me, Loki."

"I'm not," Loki says evenly (though he is), "I just think that if you act rashly, Vanaheim may respond in kind, and repercussions against Asgard could result."

"Yes, I know. It is *I* who is king, not you. And it is I who shall face those repercussions. You should be pleased that I go to such lengths, for you."

"Mercy, Thor, please," Loki says softly. "Do not act recklessly for my sake. For if you order the torture and execution of innocent prisoners, without a trial or just cause, it will only bring you that much closer to becoming the tyrant you yourself fear and despise."

It's the first time Loki's ever acknowledged what he saw in Thor's mind during the Bridge. He's not sure Thor even knows the extent of what he'd seen, or that Loki had been able to hear his thoughts through the memory. Well - Thor knows now.

"I do this for you! To bring you justice!" Thor shouts, his face contorting into an ugly snarl. "You realize why this has happened, don't you? Because I refuse to take another while I have you by my side! Would you prefer that I open my harem once again? Hmm? Accept new beauties from across the realms and succumb to my ministers' needling? Just as I have raised you up, I can cast you

down. For surely you would not have been made a target if you were but one in a thousand."

Loki falls silent. His face burns hot and his eyes begin to well. Before he knows it he's rushing towards the door.

"Loki, wait -"

Unthinkingly, Loki's feet carry him to the chambers in which the Casket is being held. Upon entering he shivers, his eyes squeezing closed, and when he opens them again he's donned his natural blue form. He whirls around and casts a spell at the door, locking it from the inside.

Forget the plan. Fuck it all. Fuck Thor. If Thor can snap his fingers and have a thousand beauties instantly at his beck and call, then he'll surely not miss Loki. Let Thor rape and torture and kill; Loki will not be the one to stop him. Loki was a fool to believe Thor could ever be a good man.

"Loki, open the door," Thor is shouting. He bangs so hard the wood rattles, but Loki's spell is firm, and Loki knows there is no way he'll be able to pierce its defenses without using Mjolnir to simply bash the whole thing down.

Loki seizes the Casket then, and savors the wash of elemental power that ripples over him. With the Casket in hand, it would only take a few seconds to call forth a wormhole and have Helblindi bring Loki through it. His dear brother is surely deep within Jotunheim's frozen wastes by now, awaiting Loki's signal with baited breath….

Thor's voice now sounds very muted and faraway indeed. It's a very serious matter to disobey him like this, but Loki doesn't care.

He deserves this, Loki thinks spitefully. *Monster.*

Something tugs in Loki's chest then; he has a sudden premonition that if he were to leave now, there would be nothing left to hold Thor back from his darker impulses. Loki knows first-hand how cruel Thor can be. If Loki did not stand up to him, he's not sure who else would.

Loki doesn't know why he picks this particular moment to say it. Call it a bout of madness, or a surge of hormones, or even an act of self-sabotage. All Loki knows, is that if Thor fails this one last test, Loki will not suffer his presence a single second longer, consequences be damned.

“I’m pregnant.”

The banging stops. There is a long pause, in which Loki can only hear the rabbit-fast hammering of his heart.

“What?”

“I’m pregnant,” Loki says again, more softly this time. His voice cracks, and Loki hates how weak it makes him sound.

Silence.

“Are you joking?”

“No, I am not joking!” Loki shouts hysterically. “Why would I be joking at a time like this?”

Another long silence.

“That’s wonderful, Loki,” comes the eventual muffled reply. “Can you please open the door so we can talk?”

Loki’s throat constricts, and his entire body sags.

“You’re happy?”

“Of course I’m happy,” comes the response, “Though I very much wish you’d open the door.”

Loki shakes his head, tears streaming down his face. His masterful tongue fails him.

The silence must drag on for a good long while, because eventually Thor says, “Did you think I wouldn’t be?”

“I don’t know,” Loki answers. Then, more quietly he adds, “Yes.”

“*Loki,”* Thor says, so honeyed Loki could almost forget everything that transpired mere moments before. “Of course I want a child by you. Why wouldn’t I? In what universe would I ever not want you?"

"Because you could have anyone," Loki says bitterly. "As you so often remind me."

"I should not have said that. I...spoke rashly."

The concession is unexpected; it's unlike Thor to admit to a mistake. Loki clears his throat. “I’ll not raise my child with a tyrant for a father. So if you intend on proceeding in the current vein, I’d rather know now, so I can stop this before it gets any further." Loki lowers his voice into a threat, so that the implication is unmistakable. "You *know* what I mean. I’ll not have innocent blood spilt on my account. I need you to promise me you’ll not forsake the vow I heard you make from within that memory. The vow you made to be the kind of man your mother would’ve been proud to call her son. For that is the only condition under which I will bear a child for you.”

There is a very long, palpable silence, and Loki worries he’s gone too far. But, Loki is committed. He refuses to back down.

“Your word, Thor! Retract the order. Please.” More softly, he adds, “Do it for me.”

“Peace, Loki. You have my word.”

Though Loki can’t see him, he sounds sincere. A promise made to a slave has no worth, but he has never known Thor to break oath with anyone, regardless of rank.

Trembling, Loki sets the Casket back down on its pedestal. The action feels final, and Loki now knows for certain that his decision has been made. A kind of peace settles upon him then - a peace that has evaded him for many, many years. His path has been set before him at last. It won’t be easy, but at least Loki now knows where his future lies. In that moment, Loki allows the last of the ties that bound him to Jotunheim to wither away and die.

The banging at the door has now devolved into soft raps.

“Loki, can you open the door please.”

With a fortifying sigh, Loki lifts the spell from the door. Thor opens it gently instead of barging in like Loki expects. The look on his face is something like bewilderment.

They lock eyes: Loki’s weary red with Thor’s apprehensive blue. Loki doesn’t miss the way Thor’s gaze quickly darts to his stomach and back again.

“I will hold you to it, I hope you know,” Loki says, curling his arms even tighter around himself.

“Yes.” Thor agrees. “I know.”

Chapter End Notes

Still a few chapters to go, and little Loki isn't out of the woods yet. Stay tuned :)

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

loki channels his inner princess diana. it goes well until it doesn't.

Chapter Notes

Oh hey an update look at that! go me. it's only been...almost a year? Thank you everyone who is still interested in this fic and still sends me messages about it. You guys are simply the best <3 Hope you enjoy this installment.

The assembled crowd is massive. Not only because it is a fine sunny day, perfect for the annual Midsummer's rites. Not only because the King himself is scheduled to attend today's ceremony, though of course the people delight in every opportunity to see their handsome leader. No, the reason the crowd has worked itself into such a frenzy is that the King's consort is also scheduled to attend - his first public appearance at the King's side.

Everyone in Asgard is itching to see this consort for themselves. Little is known about him for certain. The story of their romance has been told and retold and embellished throughout the land, so much so that it has become impossible to distinguish truth from fiction. Some claim that he is a formidable magic-user, that his powers match those of the late Queen's. Some naysayers claim he's a witch who has enchanted the King with dark seidr. All they can be sure of is that this consort's name is Loki and that he has dark hair.

The trumpets blare to herald the arrival of the royal party. The King emerges on the palace balcony to the sound of riotous cheers. His retinue trickle in behind him, of which more than a few are dark-haired and beautiful. People begin to speculate on which particular dark-haired beauty this Loki must be. Is he this one or that one? Or that tall one there? From so far below, the members of the King's retinue are hard to distinguish.

"All Hail King Thor of Asgard!" Someone shouts, and the crowd roars. The King raises a hand in acknowledgement.

"Loki, Give us Loki!" Someone else adds. The crowd begins to murmur. They like this idea.

"Loki, Loki!" They begin to shout. It begins with a few individuals, but then more and more people

join in until great swaths of the crowd are united in the chant.

There appears to be some confusion up on the royal balcony. The King's retinue whisper with each other, casting wary glances amongst themselves. Even the King himself seems taken aback. He raises a hand again to try and still the crowd. But, the people will not be diverted.

"Loki! Loki!"

In swift motion the King turns and disappears into his retinue. The crowd holds its collective breath: something is happening. When the King reemerges, he's holding the hand of a black-haired figure. That must be him! The people's cheers grow to an absurd crescendo.

The King pulls his Consort up towards the front of the balcony by his hand. It's the first anyone has ever seen of him, aside from those who have claimed to have met the royal couple in the countryside. He's slim and pale with long black hair, and indeed very beautiful. A fine match for their golden king. But even then the crowd is not satisfied.

"Kiss, Kiss!"

It can't be helped that the crowd is so invested. They love a romance. They love that their King has finally found someone to give his heart to. It has been a long time since their beloved Queen has passed, and they are eager to find someone new upon whom to lavish their affections.

There is nothing else that can be done for it. The King pulls his consort in, and to the sound of deafening cheers, places a kiss on Loki's lips.

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Loki picks at his nail lacquer until it chips and flakes off. He frowns and rubs his finger against his robes; he should really rid himself of that bad habit.

"What time is it?"

The attendant checks his pocketwatch.

“Three-forty, ser.”

Loki’s frown deepens. That means he’d been waiting now for forty minutes. He’d made a point to be early, and though he anticipated that he’d be made to wait he didn’t think it would be for so long.

“How much longer?”

The attendant shrugs apologetically. “Hard to say, ser. It varies, day to day.”

Loki is hot, much too hot, but there is nothing he can do about that right now. He also has to use the bathroom, but it’s not like he can leave his post. He could be called in at any minute. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other and fidgets with his dossier. He catches himself absently chewing his nail again - he hadn’t even realized he’d been doing it. A large chunk of lacquer is missing from one of his nails. Damn. He will have to get them redone for sure.

Loki is just about to make a break for the bathroom when at last he hears his formal introduction being made. Loki collects himself with a deep inhale, straightens his robes, and tucks his dossier securely under his arm. The doors before him open and Loki is led into the audience chamber.

Seated at the opposite end of the room behind a magnificent mahogany desk is Thor, surrounded by his councilmen and women. Loki approaches with his shoulders squared, his posture impeccably upright. He fixes his gaze on Thor and only on Thor, even though a part of Loki still finds him intimidating when he’s in his imperial regalia. Loki refuses to look away and acknowledge anyone else’s presence in the room.

At the foot of Thor’s desk Loki performs his courtly genuflection. He’d practiced beforehand, for it is a different style of bow than servants are made to do.

“Welcome, Consort of Asgard.” Thor says, his voice warm and reassuring. Loki is heartened somewhat.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. It is an honour to be here.”

“The honour is ours, for truly this is a happy day for the people of Asgard - the renewal of an old, much beloved tradition which has for far too long gone unfulfilled. How did you fare?”

“Well, I reckon, Your Majesty.”

“I heard as much,” Thor says, which may or may not be true, but Loki appreciates it anyway. Thor outstretches his hand, and Loki hands him the dossier with the day’s minutes. Thor opens it and scans the contents cursorily.

“You were kept busy,” he says, flipping through some of the pages.

“I -yes.”

“Caused a bit of a stir, did you?”

Loki smiles faintly. There *had* been something of a commotion outside the palace gates that morning. Crowds had gathered with the hopes of spotting the King’s Consort on his first official day of public duty. Ever since Midsummer’s, they can’t seem to get enough of him.

“I suppose you could say that.”

“Well then, let us not tarry. Who did you see first.”

“A party from Golden Acres Medical, Sire.”

“And?”

“They are considering renaming the west wing in honor of Her Majesty, our much beloved and dearly departed Queen Frigga, may she rest in peace. It’s a maternity ward.”

“How kind,” Thor says. “And?”

“And…They were hoping for your patronage. To renovate the old wards and expand to accommodate Asgardia’s growing population.”

“Of course,” Thor says, evidently having expected this. “How much were they asking?”

Loki hesitates. It’s an ungodly sum, but well spent. Loki has trouble saying it aloud, even though technically he isn’t the one who’s requesting it.

Thor nods, unfazed. He’s used to dealing in large amounts of gold. “So? What do you think?”

“What do I think?” Loki parrots back.

“Yes, I’m asking your advice.” Thor peers up at him slightly. His eyes glimmer.

Loki baulks. Although Loki has no doubt of his own intelligence, he has no political experience to speak of. Loki doesn’t want to overstep his bounds, and he desperately doesn’t want to say something foolish and embarrass himself. He certainly wasn’t expecting Thor to ask his opinion.

‘It’s true that quarter of the city is underserved…” Loki begins carefully.

Someone, somewhere, coughs. It sounds like a muffled snort.

Thor’s eyes never waiver from Loki’s. “Go on,” he prompts.

And Loki does, blathering on about the particularities of the cause, the relevant statistics, and the merits of their argument. His neck burns under his collar. It is a hot day, but it’s not as though Loki would have ever contemplated making an appearance here in anything other than full formal dress. These people have seen his shoulders, his bare legs. There is a reason high-born Asgardians flounce around decked in thick velvet, armor and brocade: to remind everyone that they are better than their scantily clad slaves.

“...and it would ensure that the legacy of Queen Frigga’s compassion remains green in our people’s hearts and minds.”

Thor takes a moment to consider Loki’s words. He looks over the report again carefully.

“They’ll need a royal representative when it comes time to open it,” Thor says thoughtfully. “It is likely that I will be preoccupied. You might have to go in my stead.”

At this, someone, somewhere sniggers.

“Councillor, is there something you wish to say?” Thor says curtly, addressing someone behind Loki. Loki keeps his eyes fixed ahead, and dares not look behind to see who it is. It wouldn't make a difference to know.

“No, Majesty,” comes the reply.

“It seems that there is, or is there something else that amuses you?”

“Forgive us, Majesty. It is just that….” A heavy pause, “....our opinion is that Consort Loki is unsuited to the role you have delegated to him.”

“Unsuited. How,” Thor says coolly. “Please, elaborate.”

A hush descends upon the audience chamber. Thor allows the silence to drag on for much longer than is comfortable, least of all for Loki.

Thor continues, “Clearly you take issue with my judgement in assigning him this charge. If you have grievance then air it.”

Still, silence, save for a muted rustling of clothes and a shuffling of feet. Loki doesn’t need them to *air their grievances* to know why they believe him unsuited: it’s because hearing petitions is usually a duty traditionally reserved for queens.

Thor looks about the room once, twice. “No one? No one wishes to speak?” His face finally breaks into a contemptuous sneer. “Cowards, the lot of you. Content to talk behind my back, but too spineless to voice your objections to me outright. Do you think I am deaf and simple? That I do not hear your whispers? I know what you think of him, and of me. What makes you think you are more deserving of being here than he is? Your noble blood? Your vast holdings of land? Your *superior intellects*? No, you are here because your mothers and fathers served under my parents, your grandparents served under my grandparents, and so on. You are here because custom dictates I must have one representative from each noble family of Asgard on my council. Neither you nor I have ever wanted for anything. We have never known hunger or duress. Perhaps this council could do with a fresh perspective, from one who was not *born to greatness,* as we were. Consort Loki, at least, has courage enough to speak truth to my face, which is more than I can say of any of you.”

Thor promptly signs the executive order without another moment’s hesitation. He turns his attention turns back to Loki.

He barks, “What else do you have?”

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“How are you finding it?” Thor asks.

“Finding what? Hearing petitions?” Loki says, firing a bolt of magic into a faraway tree, where it fizzles out in a wisp of smoke. “Fine, I suppose.”

“You can say it’s boring,” Thor teases. “I’ve done them before.”

“They’re not boring,” Loki says, defensive on behalf of his suppliants. “It’s just a little...overwhelming. There is so much need in the world. It is hard to know who to prioritize.”

“Indeed,” Thor agrees. “Well, that’s why the institution started - to try and rectify that somewhat. That boulder there.” He points to a mound of rocks in the distance. Loki takes aim and shoots. He narrowly misses, but when he tries again the second bolt strikes its target, shattering the rock into pebbles. Thor nods approvingly.

“Thank you for giving me the opportunity to prove myself. I know my appointment is... still a bit of a contentious topic amongst your advisors…”

“You stared them down admirably!” Thor says cheerily, patting Loki’s shoulder with a firm *thwump*. “Like a born aristocrat.”

Loki doesn’t smile. He fires a bolt morosely into the water, narrowly missing a large lake-eel. “I try.”

“I know they were trying to intimidate you. Don’t take it to heart. A bunch of stuck-up, stuffy sycophants they are, what do they know? They tend to serve their own interests, and the interests of the nobility. If they wish to retain their position at court, they haven’t an option but to put up with us.”

Us. Loki looks away, and despite himself, is pleased.

They walk along peaceably for awhile along the bank of the lake, as Loki fires bolts at this or that target at Thor’s instruction. It’s nice to get outside the palace, away from the hoards of people. Soon Loki will be too far along in his pregnancy to ride his horse even at a walking pace.

“I don’t want you to think I’m not grateful,” Loki begins carefully, because he is, and hadn’t it been his own suggestion that Thor allow him to begin taking up courtly duties? “It’s just that...it is a bit of a change for me. I am not accustomed to assuming such a public role.”

“I wouldn’t have asked you if I didn’t think you could do it."

Thor’s approval washes over Loki like a warm wave. “I just want to make you proud.”

Thor smiles at him fondly. “You do.”

Loki’s belly flutters, and it isn’t the child, who has not yet quickened.

Thor goes on, “My people are eager for the chance to have an audience with you. You’re quite the favourite. It would be foolhardy of me to deny them the pleasure. Though….” Thor makes a show

of thinking, “I am not sure I like the fireworks in the audience chamber.”

“*Indoor* fireworks,” Loki corrects.

Thor looks at him dubiously, though Loki can tell he’s also amused. “Indoor fireworks.”

“It’s all in fun. Besides, the children love it.”

“You’re going to take someone’s head off doing that.”

“Unlikely.”

“Heurig says you caught his wig on fire.”

“That was because it was horrendous and an affront unto my eyes and good taste in general.”

Thor laughs. “Just be careful.”

“I will.”

They walk a little farther until they reach the sandy banks of the lake. Loki contemplates taking his shoes off to wade in the water. The lake is usually crisp and refreshing this time of year. Loki has always hated being hot, but his tolerance for heat has markedly diminished since he got knocked up.

“So, indoor fireworks.” Thor says.

“That’s right.”

“Seems to me that implies there is such a thing as outdoor fireworks.”

Thor's eyes twinkle mischievously. It's a challenge if ever there was one. And Loki was never one to turn down a challenge, especially when it comes to magic.

Loki gathers his seidr and takes aim. With a deafening blast, the little island at the center of the lake erupts into a ball of flames.

Thor jumps backwards. "That was not fireworks!"

"No, you're right. That's a desolation spell."

"You made that island explode!"

"Yes, such is the point of desolation spell. And besides, I did a life-scan. It was uninhabited."

"I *liked* that island," Thor sniffs.

"Very well." Harnessing his magic once again, Loki lifts up a wave of lake water and folds it over the burning island. It crashes over the flames and extinguishes them instantly.

Thor squints at the island, now reduced to a decimated smouldering rock. "I should pay closer attention to what your tutors are teaching you."

"I am in good hands."

"That's what I am afraid of."

"Your child makes me strong. I feel…." Loki's voice trails off into the wind. He pats his stomach absently. "It is hard to explain. A very powerful seidr grows within me. I feel the well of my magic growing deeper...."

Thor's eyes linger on Loki's stomach, the look on his face vaguely uncomprehending. Loki has

tried to explain the complexities of diametric magic to him before, though he's never sure how much information Thor retains. There is no telling might happen when two begins of considerable seidr beget a child together, especially when their magics are as opposed as Thor and Loki's are. In many respects, this is as new territory to Loki as it is to Thor.

"If Frost Giants are all single sexed, how do you decide who...you know. Carries it?"

It takes a minute or two for this question to register. It is absurd that someone would even have to ask such a thing, and the abrupt change of topic isn't entirely welcome either.

"I'm second born - second borns usually become bearers. First borns are the heirs to estates and are therefore too valuable to risk bringing forth young. Childbirth is very dangerous in Jotunheim. The winters are harsh and dark, food is scarce, and many frost giants die in labor. If a second-born dies they are more…. *replaceable*. Though, in rural areas the Jotnar don't adhere to this rule as strictly as the nobility does." Loki says, then adds quickly: "So I've heard."

Thor mulls this over. "This brother of yours, he was first born?"

"Yes."

"But he's dead."

"Well, I think," Loki hedges, uncomfortable with an outright lie. "I don't know for sure. Probably."

"So, would that make you a 'first-born' then? An heir? If your elder brother were dead?"

Loki sighs irritably. If Helblindi had died Loki would have passed into Laufey's guardianship, seeing as he is both Loki's next of kin and liege lord - not that Loki is about to divulge any of that to Thor. And besides, Loki is tired of fabricating tall tales about his past to slake Thor's curiosity. That chapter of his life, as far as Loki is concerned, has closed; he wants nothing more than to forget bleak Jotunheim and the monsters who reside there.

"All runts are born second. That's why they come out smaller. And no, I'd have nothing to inherit. Runts don't own property. They *are* property."

The mounting bitterness in Loki's voice fades into a pensive silence. It's an opening if ever there was one: *Freedom.* In his mind's eye he imagines Thor taking him by the hand, speaking tenderly:

You are not property to me, Loki.

I must free you at once!

Why have I gone so long without doing so?

Thoughtless fool that I am! Of course my counsellors treat you so irreverently.

Loki, my love, will you ever forgive me…..

But in actuality, all Thor does is makes an interested *huh* noise.

Loki keeps his face neutral. It's his own fault for never pressing Thor on the subject. Thor has probably grown complacent in their relationship, content to keep things as they are. Loki is not sure his heart could take it if he asked for his freedom and Thor refused. If only Thor would just offer it to him openly, so Loki would not have to ask. Sometimes Loki becomes engulfed with resentment over the fact that Thor is still so content to *own* him.

This is the choice I made, Loki reminds himself. *If I wanted freedom I should have taken it when I had the chance.*

Thor watches him carefully, astute enough to sense Loki's sudden change of mood but oblivious to its cause.

"I hope you know no harm will come to you." Thor says earnestly. "I have the best healers, the best midwives."

Loki sighs. It's hard to be mad when Thor looks at him like that, but Loki manages anyway. He's not some spoiled palace concubine, and he's tired of Thor treating him like one. He's long since recovered from his poisoning, and though his pregnancy causes him to tire easily he hasn't lost any of his youthful vigor.

Loki brushes these thoughts off and jogs a little ahead. He turns to face Thor, opening his hands receptively.

“Pass to me.”

“Loki-”

“There is no one around, as I told you. Come on.”

“Haven’t you wrought enough destruction upon my countryside this fine afternoon?”

Loki rolls his eyes. He’s no longer in a jesting mood. “If we don’t keep practising I fear we will lose some of the progress we’ve made. It’s been too long already, Thor, I feel like you have been putting it off….”

Thor seems unconvinced, so Loki softens his voice reassuringly. “I’m well enough, Thor. Trust me.”

“It won’t hurt the-”

“You’re its father, half its magical endowment came from you. It will be quite immune, I assure you. In fact I think this will help the development of its seidr.”

Loki knows when Thor huffs like that he’s capitulated.

“I’m not going to go hard,” Thor tells him.

Loki suppresses a grin. “Fine.”

“And you have to release it into the ground. No more,” He waggles his fingers demonstratively, “... *fireworks.”*

"*Fine,"* Loki grits out, clapping his hands in anticipation and broadening his stance. "Come *on."*

Thor closes his eyes, his brow furrowing in concentration. The air around them becomes charged; the fire hairs on Loki's forearms stand on end. Everything around them seems to go still, and although it is a fine sunny day, a shroud of shadow seems to blanket the landscape. Loki tenses; it's the waiting that always makes him the most anxious. He breathes in and out evenly. So long as he is prepared, everything should be fine.

At last the sky opens, and a blast of lightning is brought down directly on Loki.

Even after all the practice they've done, it's still frightening to be at the centre of Thor's stormcall. Loki was braced for it, however, and had his own seidr at the ready. Using web-like tendrils of magic, Loki gathers the lightning and amasses it towards the centre of his body. All at once, Loki becomes replete with a kind of raw elemental power that he himself could never conjure. Holding it is *electrifying.* Every nerve in his body feels alive. Thor's magic is a wild form of seidr, very ancient and primal. Thor has such an abundance of it that he cannot control it all - not on his own. Even when he uses Mjolnir, his magic is brutal and unfocused. Loki would give anything to have a magical reserve as deep as Thor's - even if it meant giving up the intricate spellcraft that has long been his forte.

Loki indulges himself by holding the seidr for longer than strictly necessary. Then, as promised, he releases it into the ground, though it seems a terrible waste of so much potential carnage. The grass around him sizzles as it defuses the electricity.

Thor looks unsure. "How was that?"

"Good," Loki hisses, sucking in air through his teeth. That calibre of magic is heady, intoxicating. "Very good. You can go harder."

Thor shakes his head, though more in exasperation than outright refusal. It had taken Loki a long time to to work Thor up to the current voltage. It is a process best not pursued in haste. This exercise is not exactly without risk.….not that Loki would tell Thor that.

Loki grins wickedly. "Just a little, Thor. I can take it."

Thor cocks an eyebrow. The innuendo isn't lost on him.

“Can you.”

“I can take anything you give me, *Thunderer."*

Thor chuckles a bit but obliges. He closes his eyes. The sky grows dark. And after a heavy pause, the stormcall one again touches down directly onto Loki.

One day, Loki will get Thor to unleash *all* his magic unto him, the way Thor is only willing to do with Mjolnir. Mjolnir is but a vessel - a channel through which Thor’s magic flows, so that it does not splay in all directions. She’s a formidable weapon, there is no question about that, but there is only so much of his seidr she can control. Unlike Mjolnir, Loki is sentient, with magic of his own - magic best suited to crafting spells with precision. Over the course of their practices Loki has been training himself not only how to receive Thor’s magic, but to *harness* it. In principle, Loki thinks, he could collect Thor’s seidr and focus it into a singularity. He’s never tried it, but he sees how it could be done. All that magical energy converging to a single point. That kind of power could be nearly...unfathomable.

Loki laughs as he becomes infused with Thor’s lightning. Yes, one day, he shall have the full brunt of Thor’s magic at his fingertips. And on that day, he will finally become all he was destined to be.

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Loki tumbles backwards onto the divan, his lips never parting from Thor’s. He still feels electric from their little magickal exercise - aggressive even. There is something about those practices that makes Loki’s blood run hot. They'd barely even made it back to the palace before succumbing to their passion.

Loki eagerly grinds up to meet Thor, though they are both mindful of the growing bump between them. Thor makes a hungry noise and thrusts his tongue against Loki’s.

“Off,” Loki says, tugging at the ties to Thor’s clothes. Thor tries to help, but he is clumsy when he is overeager. He struggles to rid Loki of his clothes, even though Loki’s riding dress is much more straightforward to remove than his typical courtly attire. Thor tugs Loki’s leggings and underthings down easily enough, and Loki inelegantly kicks them off the rest of the way. Secretly, Loki relishes the effect he has on Thor. That Thor’s passion for him has not ebbed, not with time, nor with Loki’s changing shape, is a blessing not to be taken for granted.

Thor is just as hasty with his own riding clothes and pulls them off with little flourish. Nude, Thor is truly magnificent. All that power and coiled strength….. Loki had it all at his command.

Loki's hands tighten in Thor's tangle of hair, making Thor hiss. Loki firmly pushes Thor's head down.

"Pleasure me first."

Thor casts him a heated look, but he yields under Loki's grip and sinks down between Loki's legs. Loki delights in his obedience; the pleasure itself is almost an afterthought.

- *Almost.* Thor can be a very generous lover if he's in the mood. He's certainly enthusiastic. It's always thrilling to have Thor go down on him, even though Thor tends to shy away with Loki's cock. (Thor is more used to bedding women, Loki thinks.) So it's a welcome surprise when Thor takes Loki's cock in hand and mouths hotly at the tip. He doesn't take it all the way in, but instead strokes it loosely and lavishes kisses to the head, making Loki's hips buck.

Keeping a fist enclosed around Loki's cock, Thor sinks lower, which Loki also welcomes. Loki loves being eaten out, loves how sloppy Thor gets with it. At first Thor merely teases Loki's slit, his tongue probing lightly into the succulent pink folds which are quickly becoming plump and luscious with arousal. Then, having tormented Loki enough, he delves in, fucking Loki's opening voraciously.

Loki's eyes flutter closed. His legs fall that much farther open, which Thor takes as an invitation to go deeper. Thor's tongue is thick and muscular, like the rest of him. With the weight of Thor's passion behind it, it's enough to make Loki's vision go white.

Loki grinds up into Thor's face, seeking more friction. His hands clench so firmly in Thor's hair that he thinks he could smother Thor there, between his legs, deep in his cunt.

Loki lets Thor up for air only briefly. Thor pants rabidly, his mouth and beard slick with Loki's juices. He looks ravenous, antsy for his own pleasure. He rears up, his cock erect and proud and eager to sink inside the sweet warmth of Loki's body.

"No," Loki slaps him firmly across the face. "Not until I finish."

Thor's eyes, already black with lust, darken until they are bottomless pools. Any lesser being would wilt under that murderous stare, but Loki knows it for what it is. Loki has come to learn several tricks in dealing with Thor, and first among them is this: Thor gets in a mood, sometimes, where he's willing to let Loki take command. More than willing - Loki would argue that he *likes* it.

Loki slaps him again, harder this time, across the other cheek. He doubles down. "Finish me with your mouth, and then perhaps I will let you mount me."

Thor blinks a few times, registering the slap. His arms are like tree trunks on either side of Loki's head, caging Loki in. His torso is wedged between Loki's splayed-open legs, putting Loki in a very compromising position. In this attitude it would be very easy for him to simply overpower Loki. But Loki is confident that won't happen.

They stare each other down in a silent standoff. Thor is testing him, Loki thinks. He is trying to intimidate him just a little, to see if Loki will bend. But Loki is not the meek servant he once was when he first came to Asgard. He won't let himself be cowed. Thor may be strong and powerful, but Loki is cunning and brave. Loki doesn't fear him anymore. And Loki suspects that's what Thor likes about him.

At last Thor cracks, as Loki knew he would. Loki's face breaks out into a feral grin as Thor crawls back down to finish the task at hand. Thor sets about it with renewed vigor, lapping between Loki's folds like a greedy dog. He's good like this. So good.

This is power, Loki thinks gleefully, with the King of Asgard's mouth on him, pleasuring him at his command. Loki may not sit on a throne, may not even have his freedom, but no one will ever mistake who Thor belongs to.

Loki cums with a broken moan, his fingers clenching painfully in Thor's hair. He falls backwards, limp and sated, a perverse smile still toying on his lips.

Thor climbs up from between his legs, looking stormy and intent. Dreamily, Loki considers how fun it would be to refuse. Not because he doesn't want Thor to fuck him. Just to know that he *could* say no, and be obeyed.

Another time, perhaps. Loki never had any intention of denying him. Thor has been good. Loki will see to it that he is rewarded.

Somehow Loki finds the energy to reverse their positions, such that Thor is laying on his back and Loki is sitting astride him. Thor goes easily, allowing Loki's maneuvering once he realizes what Loki intends.

"Let me take care of you now," Loki hushes, pushing Thor down with a hand to the chest. Without any more ado Loki takes Thor's cock in hand and guides it into his body. Sinking down on it feels exquisite. Thor whines appreciatively; he's wound up and needy for release. Loki begins to rock on him, rolling his hips sensually the way he knows Thor likes.

Loki slips his fingers into Thor's slack mouth and is treated to the warm, wet feeling of his tongue. Loki likes Thor best like this, with that stupid, lovestruck look on his face, so amenable and receptive. Loki thinks he could ask anything of him, and Thor would say yes.

Make me Queen.

Loki doesn't say it aloud. He can't toy with that now, not like before, when it was so far beyond the realm of possibility that it could only be taken in jest.

What he can say, is: "You are mine."

Loki closes a gentle hand on Thor's throat, just because he knows Thor will let him. No one can have Thor like this. A possessive greed washes over Loki.

Mine, mine.

Yes, despite everything, Thor is his, and Loki won't give him up, not for the world.

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The pregnancy is officially announced soon thereafter. Loki had his reservations about making the news public, but unlike some secrets, this is not one he could keep forever. Thor's court is superficially supportive, but Loki can sense an undercurrent of disapproval. This is not news they welcome, for it will make Loki that much harder to be rid of. Having Thor's favor so publicly acknowledged is vindicating, at least. Loki updates his wardrobe from looser, billowy kaftans to

outfits that hint at the outline of his belly. Let them see who is truly beloved of the King of Asgard!

The people, however, rejoice. The outpouring of gifts and congratulations is bewildering. For reasons that yet elude him, Loki has become something of a cult figure. He doesn't know why Thor's subjects adore him so. Perhaps it is because they had not seen him as a slave. They only know him as Thor's Consort, as regal and splendid as the King himself. Perhaps it's the fact that he's managed to keep the King's attention for so long. Or perhaps it's just because Thor has never made any of his relationships official before. Whatever the reason, it is marvelous to be beheld with such awe. Loki positively basks in it. He's never been so well loved. It makes him want to do something to deserve it. It's strange, but he feels more attachment to these people than he ever did for his kindred back home. Jotunheim was never kind to him, and Loki has never felt much sympathy for it in return.

They bring him charms of middling quality to help with his pregnancy, flowers from their gardens, hand-crafted items and other tchotchkes. Loki rewards them with illusions and other magic tricks. They thank him for his intercession on their behalf; Loki promises to do his best to see to their welfare. He surprises himself in that he means it. It's gratifying the way their love for him grates on his fellow courtiers. Loki plays it up, beaming beatifically at the public who come pay him homage, giving out gold coins for luck as he sometimes does. He accepts tribute from lesser nobles on Thor's behalf, chests of gold and gems and all manner of fine goods piled at his feet. Loki delights in it all.

And then...then comes the sobering duty of giving the day's report to Thor and his council. Loki faces them down proudly, as though he were deaf to their disparaging whispers and blind to the disdain in their faces.

Witch, they call him. *Silvertongue.*

Loki wears his pride like plate armor. They think he's haughty and conceited? Loki spent his youth in Jotunheim's royal court. He knows how to act like a snob.

But secretly, on the inside, it gets to Loki more than he'd like to admit. Their stares and condescension serve to remind Loki of what he was, what he is. The vulnerability of his position. They want nothing more than for Thor to put him back in his place. Loki fears that one day they may get their wish.

It was not like this when Loki first came to Asgard. When he was just a lowly concubine - one of many - he did not merit their consideration. He was just a dancing slave for Thor to amuse himself with. It's only since Loki has gained so much clout that he's put himself in their crosshairs. Loki's presence impedes them from arranging a proper marriage for Thor. Thor has shown no interest in their daughters since Loki came on the scene, and they resent Loki for it. As if it were *his* fault

their girls are so lacking in charm and wit.

Sinister suspicions have taken root in Loki's mind. Though Loki has no proof, he could certainly picture some of the courtiers delighting in his poisoning and hoping fervently for him never to wake. In fact, Loki could easily believe it was they who plotted to get rid of him in the first place. Perhaps they'd used the opportunity the banquet afforded to frame those poor Vanir delegates. Loki's assassin was never found, and the Vanir suspects were deemed innocent from lack of evidence and were subsequently released. Loki does not breathe a word of his suspicions to Thor, but he keeps himself on high alert. Now that they know he's with child, he is more of a target than ever. And Loki is not about to let anything happen to his child.

It has always been Loki's custom to secret himself away into the deepest recesses of the royal library when life at court becomes overwhelming and he needs space to clear his mind. It's a welcome stint of solitude, especially when his hangers-on and attendants begin to grate on his nerves. The earthy smell of books has always been a comfort to Loki. He relishes the leatherbound spines, the gilt work filigree, the delicate miniatures. Loki spends hours pouring over old manuscripts and exploring every crevasse, letting his curiosity be his guide. Asgard has the most magnificent library in all the Realms. The ceiling soars above, many stories high, with bookshelves adorning every wall. Every manner of book can be found there: bestiaries, texts on science and technology, astronomy, alchemy and botany. But what's always pleased Loki best are spellbooks. Since gaining access to the Imperial Library, Loki's understanding of the complexities of spellcraft has vastly expanded. He was always cognizant of his natural talents but it's only now, with the training and the knowledge available to him, that he sees just how much potential he has within.

Lately, however, Loki hasn't been perusing spellbooks and old tomes. For the last month Loki has shifted his focus to court documents, annals, and official histories of Asgard. The material is dull, written in archaic legalese, and Loki's eyes blur as he tries to focus on the minuscule text. But he is steadfast in his search. What he is looking for is a precedent. A legal precedent. What Loki is searching for, specifically, is any evidence of an heir of Asgard who was not born of a queen.

For, a new and dangerous idea has been formulating in Loki's mind. Having given up on the Casket, and therefore having nullified the prospect of living emancipated in Jotunheim, Loki had to come up with a new vision for his future. Central to this vision is securing a position for his child. While Loki still holds Thor's favour, he plans on utilizing every avenue open to him to train his child in the ways of seidr. Loki will personally see to it that he or she will have the most accomplished magickal tutors at their disposal, so that their natural talents will blossom to the fullest extent. Loki's child will boast magic-skill that will surely be unmatched in all the Realms. By the time Loki falls from favour, their child will be too great an asset to be disposed of.

Loki pats his stomach sadly. He despises that his offspring would be born with such a burden on its little shoulders. But the stark truth is that his child may well be the only thing that will ever tangibly link him to Thor. After Thor tires of Loki and moves forward with his life, as he inevitably will, Loki will have this child as leverage. As a pawn, as Loki himself had once been. It will ensure that Loki will continue to receive Thor's support so that his fate will not be like that of so many

other old, discarded favourites - destitute, used-up and unwanted. It is not an ideal plan, but Loki can't think of any other way to provide for himself. He'd never been on his own; he'd always had someone to care for him. It's not that Loki doesn't think himself capable of surviving, it's just….he doesn't want Thor to forget about him.

Loki would much prefer to be able to stake a claim on Thor himself. For awhile Loki contemplated trying to convince Thor of a morganatic marriage. At the very least, a left-handed marriage would ensure that Thor could wed no other. It's the only kind of marriage that is realistically within Loki's sights, given the difference in his and Thor's rank. It would certainly be preferable to watching someone else be Thor's queen. Except, children of such unions do not inherit neither property nor title. And Thor *needs* a legitimate heir, by a legitimate queen.

Loki understands why such laws are in place: not only so that the royal line will not be diminished by lesser blood, but also to ensure a direct, undisputed line of royal succession. Errant bastards have a nasty habit of coming out of the woodwork to cause trouble. Thor would be a fool to make an illegitimate child his heir, even Loki can grudgingly see that. Thor's priority, rightly, should be the continued stability of his dynasty.

If only he could marry Thor outright in the full legal sense. That would solve all Loki's problems, and finally give him the peace of mind he's been searching for all his life. It would also de facto make Loki queen. *Queen of Asgard.* Loki snorts. The idea of it is still so preposterous Loki doesn't even deign to think on it…. most of the time.

He'd be a good queen, Loki thinks. Don't they already say he's been a calming influence on Thor? It was Loki who had stayed Thor's hand before he'd acted rashly and executed those Vanir prisoners. And the people already love him so. He'd be good for the realm. Thor could do worse than having a sorcerer-queen like Loki at his side. Loki wouldn't even be the first Jotunn queen of Asgard - just the first in a few millennia. Loki would accept any title so long as he was regarded by all as Thor's true and rightful partner.

Thor may be King, but he is bound by the laws of the land, and not even he can uproot the nature of things. If Thor were to ever change the law he'd need his Council's approval, and Loki's certain they'd never grant such a thing. It would probably give them the greatest satisfaction to deny Loki this honour. They still see him as that gussied-up tart Odin brought to Asgard years ago. They think he'd slept with the old man too…..ugh. There are even rumors that Loki had cast a wicked love-spell on both father and son. Ha! If only it had been as easy as that.

Loki knows they are still in search of a royal princess for Thor to wed, ever hopeful that one day Thor will bend to their demands. They want an actual woman as Thor's wife, not an mix-gendered Jotun runt of questionable origins. A woman with connections - one who could secure an alliance, or who would come with considerable land or wealth. Though Loki is confident in Thor's affection for him, he isn't sure there won't come a day when Thor finally succumbs to pressure and marries

some princess from one of the Realms. The idea of it makes Loki seethe; he has earned his place! He has worked so hard to bring Thor to heel. No one else deserves it; no one should reap the rewards he has sown.

Loki sometimes thinks on it when he lies awake at night. The image festers in his mind: Thor, resplendent in his ceremonial armor, taking some fresh-faced girl by the hand and promising to be her husband, to honour her and cherish her. He crowns her with a diadem that should be rightfully be Loki's and kisses her on the mouth, in front of everyone. Loki's heart twists viscerally.

Loki slams the books closed. He can't dwell on that now. For the time being, he'll set his sights lower to a more feasible goal. Being granted his own freedom would be inconsequential. Pointless, even. But more and more Loki thinks he would like to have it. Even if he can't marry Thor, or be his queen, it would be nice to know he isn't still officially a slave. It wouldn't change anything between them; not really. But he would like for his child to be born free.

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Loki spends the rest of the day cooling himself off in the bath, hoping to cool his mind as well. It must be his fluctuating hormones that are making him so moody. And, Loki hates to admit, so clingy. He aches for Thor to be finished for the day so he can see him again. Ugh, it's like being in heat all over again, the way he pines after Thor. At least now Loki has something pin the blame on. (It's not *him* that yearns for Thor, it's the damn child. Yes.)

To make himself feel better Loki orders a tray of sweet cakes. He devours them ravenously all in a single go. (It's not *him* that wants second helpings of dessert….)

Loki later finds himself throwing himself at Thor, who has never been very hard to seduce.

"You're so affectionate these days," Thor comments, smiling goofily as he does when he's just had an orgasm. His cheeks are a lovely rosy colour.

The kind of reassurance Loki needs, *craves,* he can't bring himself to ask for. It's easier instead to tumble into bed and avail himself of the warmth and security of Thor's body.

Loki is still distracted the following morning, and his mind drifts as he's engaging in his newly-appointed public duties. He reminds himself to focus. These people have come hither to pay their respects and to offer gifts to Thor's unborn child. The least Loki could do is stop moping and pay

attention.

Loki takes stock of the tribute laid at his feet, destined for Thor's treasury: jewelry, fine robes, artwork and furniture, including more than a few expensive-looking bassinets. At the end of the line is a small chest, simply ornamented, and accompanied by no one. Even from across the audience chamber, Loki can feel the seidr pulsing off it in ripples.

Intrigued, Loki moves closer. "Who is this from?"

His attendant consults the ledger and flips back and forth between several pages. She frowns.

"It, uh, doesn't say, ser."

Loki pops the latch and opens the chest. When he beholds what's inside, he gasps.

A *palantir.*

Cradled in black velvet sits a gleaming orb, about the size of a small melon, perfectly spherical and polished. Plumes of purple-blue light shimmer within its smokey core. It exudes a kind of magic that Loki is immediately excited by. There's a mysterious energy about it, and Loki is compelled to touch, but he restrains himself.

"Beautiful," he whispers. He'd never seen anything like it before, though he'd read about them in books. This is no mere trinket. This is...fantastic, in the most literal sense of the word. An artifact of great mystic power. Loki itches to investigate it further, but he's keenly aware of the queue of suppliants still waiting to present their petitions to him. It wouldn't do to play favourites. It will have to wait.

"Bring this to my room," Loki says.

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Loki eagerly bounds up the stairs to his and Thor's suite. The day's affairs had taken longer than he would have liked, and though he'd received many kind and thoughtful gifts, there is only one

that merits thorough investigation.

On his desk sits the chest, just as Loki had instructed. WIth mounting excitement Loki once again undoes the latch, revealing the treasure within. The palantir is cold, Loki can tell just by the temperature of the air surrounding it. Whispers of light hover just underneath his hand, as if to entice him to touch. When Loki waves his hand, the light tracks his movement.

As soon as his fingers graze the surface, Loki feels a peculiar sensation overcome him, and immediately he realizes something is amiss. There is a force tugging on him, tugging on his *mind* , as though a vacuum were sucking him in. Loki tries to fight it, but the magic is overpowering, so much so that he can't even unstick his hand from the palantir's surface. Despite his best efforts to resist, his consciousness is wrenchened out of his own head, exiting his body and entering the orb.

Inside, Loki's consciousness coagulates, reformulating into a Loki-like avatar, though Loki is aware his physical self still exists, large and looming, beyond the palantir's surface. Time seems to have frozen for his physical self, which means that his consciousness is currently inhabiting some kind of intra-dimensional plane - one which exists beyond the regular limits of time and space. This kind of magic is frightening, foreign. He does not know how it was able to overwhelm him, nor how to escape.

"Hello, brother."

The smoke around him condenses and a silhouette begins to form.

"I believe congratulations are in order. I wish I could have come pay you homage in person, but circumstances have not been favorable. You know how it is," the spectre says breezily.

"What's the meaning of this?" Loki says, trying not to let his voice waiver. "What is this?"

"Oh this? Do you like it? A little psycho-telepathic spell. Took me months to develop. I thought we could use it as an opportunity to have a chat. We so rarely speak anymore...."

Loki swallows dryly. "What do you want?"

Avatar-Helblindi raises his eyebrows. "Is that how you greet your own kin? After I've worked so hard to reach you? *Consort of Asgard,* " he mocks, "Your head has been inflated by your master's

flattery. Too good to even embrace your brother after his long absence. You always did have an arrogant streak. Rather high and mighty for a slave. Remind me again, has Thor freed you yet?"

"What do you want?" Loki demands again.

"Oh, I think you know." Helblindi's eyes flash accusingly. "I never heard from you. I waited and waited but…..you never summoned my wormhole. Why is that?"

"I don't have it," Loki says, as smoothly as he is able. "If I did, I would have made the summons."

"See, the thing about that is, I am not entirely sure you're being truthful with me. In fact, I am beginning to harbor the troubling thought that you have changed sides."

Loki forces a laugh. "Absurd."

"Is it," Helblindi sneers. "I had a feeling you were getting soft, I saw the weakness in you before I left. You did not heed my advice, you let yourself get with child. But I shouldn't be surprised. He's kept you well. I imagine there are aspects of your captivity your find -" his eyes narrow, "- Pleasurable."

"You think I enjoy this?" Loki waves a hand in emphasis over his belly. "I have suffered in ways you cannot imagine at Thor's hands. I have endured humiliation after humiliation. If it was your goal to punish me for my affair with Ulfr than rest assured you have succeeded. It is absurd to think Thor would've ever trusted me with the Casket. *Me.* A Jotunn slave. A whore." Loki swallows back the bile in this throat at having to say that word. "I am nothing to him - nothing but a body to warm his bed….He'll be married to some princess within a year or two and I will be cast aside and forgotten. Believe me when I say every courtier in this damn place is plotting to hasten my demise. Thor may have brought the Casket to Asgard in order to save my life but I never saw it, not while I was conscious. It was returned to its secret keep shortly after I made my recovery, and there it stays. It's not going to happen, brother. It's over. I have failed. *We* have failed. It is time to give up on this ridiculous plot of yours. I am finished with it. I…I am sorry."

Helblindi falls silent. He nods gravely. "Yes, I am sorry as well. Sorry it has come to this."

A blinding bolt of seidr forms at Helblidi's fingertips, striking Loki in the forehead and tearing into his exposed consciousness. Loki screams. It' a spell he recognizes - a Bridge. But it is unlike any Bridge Loki has ever undergone. This is corrupt, unnatural. Loki never thought it possible to

accomplish a Bridge without the host's consent. The sensation of Helblindi ripping through his mind is agony.

And to Loki's horror, his memories spill out as uncontrollably as water bursting from a ruptured dam. Not just one memory, but a great cascade. All Loki's own secrets. Everything he'd experienced with Thor. Their rides together out in the countryside. Their fights and their reconciliations. The intimate moments they'd shared. All of it - laid bare under Helblindi's scrutiny.

Helblindi claws through Loki's memories in a rabid frenzy. He is looking for something. And Loki panics, such that the very memory he was trying to repress pops to the surface: one of him and Thor. Loki is blue. The Casket is nearby. Thor is saying something.

….*We keep it secured away safely, hidden deep inside the moon of Dunyr…..*

All at once, Helblindi retreats with a mighty roar.

"I knew it. You love him. Traitor." Helblindi backhands Loki with a bolt of energy. "You want to be his queen, do you? His *little wife*? Enjoy his favour while you can, for he will indeed discard you once you've been used up, bastard or no bastard. I came to give you this one last chance to redeem yourself, but now I see where your true allegiance lays. Don't come crawling back to me when he abandons you, for if you so much as set foot on Jotunheim's icy wastes I will personally see to it that your head will rot on a spike at Laufey's gate."

Loki blinks up at him dazedly. "You burned my body."

A cold silence descends upon them both. For, what Helblindi doesn't realize, is that in prying into Loki's mind, he'd been careless - unable, perhaps, to shield himself while so viciously attacking Loki. He'd become exposed in return. And just as Helblindi had seen into Loki's most private and most intimate memories, so had Loki seen into Helblindi's.

And what Loki had seen was himself, his blue Jotunn self, burning on a funeral pyre. The Jotunn in attendance, amongst them Laufey himself, watch emotionlessly until the fake-Loki's corpse is reduced to nothing but cinders.

The truth strikes Loki all at once:

Laufey doesnt know I'm here.

Laufey doesn't know I'm alive.

And then comes the horrifying conclusion: Laufey never sent him to Asgard in the first place.

"You hid me in plain sight by bleaching my skin," Loki's voice is little more than a hoarse whisper. "You faked my death and sent me here because you wanted me to secure the Casket for yourself, so that you could use it to overthrow Laufey. And when you grew impatient, you poisoned me. You told Thor only the Casket would save me, knowing he would be forced to bring it to Asgard. You used me. All this time. It was *you."*

A look of shock and panic flits across Helblindi's face. It's all the confirmation Loki needs.

"What are you going to do? Tell Thor?" Helblindi seethes, his mouth twisting into a terrifying snarl. "For if you do, you will have to reveal all. You will have to admit that you and I have been scheming behind his back, under his very nose. For *years.* You'll have to tell your darling lover how all this time you've been playing him for a fool, that every sweet word you've ever fed him was nothing but a filthy lie. You will be exposed for what you truly are: treasonous snake. He won't even grant you death - no, not for what you've done. You'll spend an eternity Underground, in that rancid dungeon, and your unborn bastard will be culled before it even draws its first breath." Helblindi cocks his head, triumphant. "You do remember that night you spent down there, don't you? Oh, I'm sure you do. I saw it for myself. You will suffocate down there, and be unable to die. You will rot and feel the flesh peel off your bones. Thor will spare neither a shred of mercy, nor a single tear, for a traitor like you." He grins maniacally. "Run to Thor, then. If you damn me damn yourself."

All at once, the spell implodes. Loki re-enters his corporeal body in a great violent whoosh, only to have his knees give out. He crumples to the ground, and the palantir slips from his finders, shattering into a million glittering shards upon the marble floor. From another room, his attendant Inga shrieks, having been summoned by the crash.

"Consort Loki!" She gasps as she crouches down next to him. "Your nose…"

Loki dabs at the growing wetness on his upper lip with the back of his hand. His fingertips come back bloody; his hands are trembling.

He looks up at her. “Where is Thor?”

“His Majesty is at council,” Inga responds in bewilderment. “What happened?”

Loki rips himself out of her grasp and scrambles to his feet. His stomach lurches at the sudden movement, and it’s all Loki can do not to throw up. He presses his hand upon his belly to steady himself.

If Helblindi acquires the Casket, there is no telling what destruction he will impart - not only within Jotunheim, but beyond, to the peaceful Realms. To Alfheim, Vanaheim...to Asgard, even. Loki knows now what his brother is capable of. There is no limit to Helblindi’s bloodthirst and ambition. To have executed such a complex, multilevel spell? From across *two Realms*? Helblindi’s magickal endowments are greater than Loki feared. Were he to acquire the Casket, there is no telling how powerful he could become. There may even come a point where he will prove invincible.

Loki had not thought twice about returning the Casket to Jotunheim when he believed he was doing so for Laufey. Laufey may not necessarily be the best king, but he is not a warmonger - not after the disastrous Great War. Laufey has not the ambition, nor the strength of leadership, nor the gifts of seidr that Helblindi possesses. He could never use the Casket in the way Helblindi intends. The more Loki thinks on it, the more he realizes he’d never even spoken to Laufey on the subject of his mission at all. All his directives had come from Helblindi. How could he have been such a *fool?*

Spite and fury course through Loki at everything Helblindi has put him through. He thinks Loki so cowardly that he’ll sit quietly by as Helblindi conquers each Realm one by one? Loki *won’t* let him get away with this. Helblindi will already be on his way to Dunyr by now, but if he could be intercepted, if he could be stopped before he reaches the Casket….there might yet be hope.

Loki mops his face with his sleeve. There is only one course of action.

“I must speak to him.”

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Loki ploughs through the palace in a blurr. He dares not stop to think; he cannot allow himself to dwell on the consequences of what he is about to do. He reaches the Councilroom in a flurry. The

guard at the door holds up his hand to intercept him.

“No-one may disrupt His Majesty when he is at Council.”

Loki snarls. “Damn you, let me pass!”

Loki shoves past them with little resistance. The Einherjar at their posts seem reluctant to lay their hands on their King’s hysterical pregnant consort. Loki would not let them stop him even if they tried. He’d use his magic against them if he had to. There is precious little time to waste.

Loki barges into the council room, slamming the door open with a resounding clash. Thor looks up in surprise from where he and his other advisors are pouring over a map.

“Loki,” Thor says, “What’s the meaning of this?”

The sudden silence is sobering. Thor’s councillors are all staring in open disapproval. Loki’s mouth opens, but no sound comes out. He hadn’t thought this far ahead.

“Can I talk to you?” Loki eventually manages. “Alone?”

“What is it?” Thor’s face softens. His eyes flit down to Loki’s stomach. “Is it…”

“It’s not - that,” Loki says faintly.

“Loki, I am in the middle of Council.”

“Now, Thor. Please. I wouldn’t have come if it wasn’t urgent.”

Thor hesitates a beat, considering, but this is enough to convince him. He politely excuses himself and follows Loki out into the hallway. There he stops and crosses his arms expectantly in front of his chest.

Loki shakes his head, willing himself not to cry. There are too many Einherjar milling about, still agitated after their scuffle.

“Not here. Somewhere private.”

Thor huffs, but allows Loki to take him by the hand and lead him back towards their private chambers. The walk is not a long one but it feels like it goes on for miles. It is accomplished in complete silence.

Once there, Loki closes the door behind them with a final-sounding click. Thor turns to face him.

“So,” he says.

Having Thor stand there like that is doing nothing to help calm Loki’s nerves. Loki can’t believe he is about to do this. His fury at Helblindi begins to dwindle in the face of his self-preservation.

“Can you sit down?” Loki says meekly.

Obediently, Thor does, perched on the edge of a couch, his back ramrod straight and his hands resting placidly in his lap.

“Loki, what is it?”

Thor’s eyes are so full of affection and concern. Loki doubts Thor will ever look at him that way again, after this. All the tender moments, Thor’s smile, his clumsy attempts at romance. Everything Loki has built with him, all about to be destroyed.

“The Realms are in grave danger.” Loki blurts out.

Thanks to me, he doesn’t add.

Thor’s eyebrows tighten. “What?”

“Thor, I- ” Loki begins, but once again finds the words won’t come. If he cannot speak, he will have to show. He reaches up towards Thor’s temple. “I have something I need to show you.”

Thor bats his hand away. “I told you no more Bridges.”

“Please,” Loki croaks. He finally cracks and begins to cry. “Please.”

Thor goes wide-eyed at Loki's obvious desperation. His lips press in a firm line and finally he nods his assent.

Loki breathes deeply, touches Thor's forehead, and unveils all his secrets.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

> Thank you everyone who is still reading this fic and sending me lovely comments about it! I've been working on this fic forever and I wouldn't have continued if it weren't for you. y'all have been an absolute dream. We're on the home stretch towards the ending now! I'm committed to finishing it. Apologies for any errors; I am unbetaed.
>
> my husband was joking that we should do a podcast of him reading this fic. He knows vaguely what it's about. It would be an unedited version that captures his horrified reactions and my utter mortification. lol. He's like, "it's not like there's mpreg in there!" and I don't laugh and then we both avoid eye contact for the rest of our dinner.
>
> Anyway, Enjoy! ^^

Helblindi does not remember much of Loki's birth, for it was eclipsed by his dam's death. Their Father, Nal, cradles Loki's tiny fragile body in one hand as he presents him to Helblindi for the first time. Helblindi gazes down at Loki, his feelings of hatred for the little creature all-consuming. All he knows is that had Loki not been born, their dam might still be alive. Helblindi swears he will despise Loki for as long as they both live.

Loki was always small for his age. Everyone suspected he would turn out to be a runt.

"Keep him intact," Father says as he lay dying. "Laufey may want him."

When Loki reaches puberty, his hair does not shed like others of his age. It confirms what they all had long suspected: Loki is a runt, a second born runt. And he's magnificent. His heritage lines swoop elegantly across his face and body, perfectly symmetrical. Quite unlike the jagged, haphazard lines of common folk.

At their ancestral manor-house, Helblindi keeps Loki under lock and key, which proves easy to do when Loki is so readily occupied with books and magicraft. But before long, it's time to debut Loki at court. Loki is young, just past adolescence, but he's already turning heads, and it is widely thought that once he reaches maturity he'll be the most beautiful runt in all Jotunheim.

Having previously lived a sheltered, isolated life at their manor-house, Loki positively thrives at court, ever the centre of attention. He enjoys being adored, and there is little Helblindi can do to mute his natural splendour. Helblindi watches over his brother carefully - even obsessively. He

uses his magic to spy, but Loki is tricksey, and sometimes hides himself where Helblindi cannot see. Loki's first heat is many years away, but even so Helblindi cannot afford to wait. The sooner he can get mated off, the better.

Helblindi sees the way Laufey looks at Loki. Not with lust, but certainly with interest. He's always been fond of Loki, and has bestowed his favor on more than one occasion. He may be less hard to convince than Helblindi anticipated. Incest is not uncommon in the royal family of Jotunheim, but it is best to approach such things with delicacy.

"Loki is coming of age. I will need to find a mate for him soon - with your blessing of course, dear Uncle. Someone worthy." Helblindi says as he and Laufey watch Loki amuse a gaggle of onlookers with his burgeoning magic. Helblindi pointedly scans the crowd and sighs. "But, there is a dearth of Jotun of noble blood, so many have perished in the Great War. Many have come to me asking suit but I could not debase Loki by giving him to a lesser Jotun. Certainly I could not give him to any Jotun whose lineage is anything less than royal…"

Laufey looks at him flatly. He'd been expecting this.

"You want to give him to me."

"Would it not be the best for our family? Nal wished it so, Uncle; he made me swear to try and see it to fruition. He was concerned for Loki, he expressed it to me in his final hours. He hoped to find someone who would treat Loki well, and who would provide for him in a manner fitting of his birth. There are too many clans that look upon our family with spite and jealousy. They would use Loki to breed out their crooked lines. I would hate to see my brother so mistreated. Truthfully I cannot think of a better match, or a better future, for him."

"He's a child," Laufey says. "He is too small."

"He will be more submissive to you."

Laufey rolls his eyes. Loki's penchant for mischief is not unknown at court.

"I somehow doubt that."

Then, the cincher. Helblindi lowers his voice a notch. "I have seen to it that he has kept his

virginity."

At this, Laufey takes pause. If Helblindi knows anything about Laufey, it's that he's deeply superstitious. It is thought, by some old-fashioned Jotun, that first night's blood has the power to bestow blessings of fertility and luck on a king's reign. Virgin blood can cleanse maledictions, too. Helblindi knows Laufey believes himself cursed. He would never risk taking a mate who would not bestow a blood-blessing. If Laufey weren't such a fool, he would realize it isn't a curse that is the source of his troubles, but his own incompetence. He sits and languishes on his throne, mourning the loss of the Casket and paying little heed to the mutinous whispers behind his back. Little wonder Jotunheim crumbles.

"Maybe in a few winters," Laufey says uncertainly, making Helblindi seethe. The old fool! Winters, he does not have. Helblindi does not think he could keep Loki in line that long. Loki is stubborn, and willful. He's becoming harder and harder to control. Loki has taken to escaping from his tower in the night - how, Helblindi does not know. Helblindi does not like his budding flirtatiousness, his awakening sexuality. He worries Loki will do something stupid.

"Take him come spring. He will have grown by then. He will be ready." Helblindi says, not caring if this were true. He will train Loki not to cry.

Laufey grunts by way of response. He gazes upon Loki sadly.

"He looks like his dam," says Laufey, recalling his long dead younger brother.

"Lay with him once, claim your blood-blessing. Then wait, if you choose, until he grows older. His heat will follow in due course and he will conceive. He has beautiful lines. Your offspring will be magnificent."

Laufey narrows his red eyes. "Nephew, it seems to me that you are in a rush."

Helblindi does not let his smile falter. "I wish for this curse to be lifted as soon as possible, so that these troublesome times will finally be at an end."

"Spring then." Laufey sighs, and Helblindi smiles expansively.

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When the incident happens Helblindi can't even say he's surprised. He knew that Ulfr was a snake, out to snatch Loki up like a trophy. How Loki could've ever believed Helblindi would consent to the match, Helblindi doesn't know. Loki must have been truly desperate to go to such extremes.

Collecting Loki's share of their inheritance is but a small consolation. Helblindi already has a sizable fortune. It would have been far more advantageous to have Loki in Laufey's bed. There is no way Laufey would have him now, no matter how fond of him he is.

Helblindi could kill Loki for this insult. In times past that would be expected. He's angry enough that he'd have no compunctions about doing so. But, Helblindi's reasonable mind takes over. It would be a waste to kill Loki. There may be a way to salvage this situation. Loki is beautiful. His natural gifts of seidr. It would be worth having him bear offspring, if only to pass on his lines. He could make a very useful commodity....if he learned a little obedience.

"Quit crying," Helblindi snaps, unmoved by Loki's whinging. "You brought this on yourself. I'm the one who had to go to Laufey and explain what you did. You are lucky he is fond of you, else this indiscretion would cost you your life."

Loki sniffs, cradling his bruised face. Helblindi admits somewhat better now that he'd let his frustrations out. He used to refrain from striking Loki on the face for fear of damaging his pretty lines. He supposes it does not matter now.

"I will send you to the witch Angrboda," Helblindi decides. "He takes in runts like you. He will teach you some discipline."

Loki perks up. "A witch?"

"Yes," Helblindi says. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? Don't look so pleased with yourself. I've instructed him explicitly you're to learn a skill to make you more eligible. Music, or dance. He is well versed in the traditional folkloric."

Loki makes a face.

"My dear brother, if you think yourself above such things, you should not have -" He leans right into Loki's face, "Let yourself be ruined!"

Loki flinches satisfyingly, and Helblindi goes on, "You may yet attract some decent prospects. Of any acceptable suitors of rank I will allow you to choose the final match."

Helblindi says it to turn Loki complacent. He has no intention of following through. Loki will accept whoever Helblindi chooses to give him to.

"And what will you do?"

"I will remain at court. To fix this mess you've made, and see what can be done for our family."

Loki considers this carefully. Helblindi can see the wheels in his mind turning, weighing his options. He likes the idea of being out from under Helblindi's thumb, Helblindi can tell. Loki grits his jaw and his eyes turn steely. He wipes the last of his tears off his face.

"Fine."

***

Ten years is a long time. Without Loki to guard, Helblindi devotes his considerable energies to statecraft. He witnesses first-hand just how useless Laufey is. Laufey spends hours locked away with his scryers and soothsayers when he should be at Council, dealing with the interminable crises that seem to plague his reign. It is often Helblindi who must intervene to keep Laufey's government from falling apart.

Helblindi's cutthroat approach to politics earns him quite the reputation: Laufey's Wolf. Helblindi proves the downfall of more than one up-and-coming clan. More than a few enemies are accumulated in the process. If a clan is wise, they'd try to make an ally of him. Helblindi chooses his friends carefully.

It is still widely known that Helblindi's runtling brother, Loki, the erstwhile jewel of Laufey's court, is of age and yet unmatched. Those who remember Loki speak floridly of his wit and beauty. Rumors circulate of a scandal, of a forfeited inheritance, but that does little to lessen Loki's appeal. Loki is still the nephew of the King, and the brother of Jotunheim's most powerful lord. He would make a fine consort for any Jotun of noble standing.

Helblindi actively cultivates interest in Loki. He has his eye on a few potential allies. Brutal, rough warriors, not that it matters. He dangles Loki over their noses, pitting one suitor against another. He reminds them that he'd sent Loki to Angrboda; who, having received Loki as a diamond-in-the-rough, by now has surely polished him into a true jewel.

He bides his time. Nothing worthwhile is born from haste.

***

A great consumption sweeps over the land, sparing neither rich nor poor. Laufey himself almost succumbs to illness. His second mate had just passed while still heavy with child.

"Recall Loki from exile. I need him," Laufey says as he lies in his sickbed. "I fear I may die before I have an heir."

"You will still have him?" Helblindi gasps.

"No," Laufey coughs. "I am cursed. Two mates have I taken, and two have perished before bearing young. If I took Loki he would surely suffer the same fate."

"Then for what purpose?"

"I will give him to Fornjot. He will make a strong leader. He has proven himself in combat and has demonstrated his loyalty to me many times over. But, his family lines are too rustic, too thick and undignified. He will never be accepted as king in his own right. With Loki as his mate, he will be legitimized. Their young will inherit Loki's royal kinlines."

"But, Loki is disgraced!" Helblindi sputters. "He will impart no blood-blessing!"

"That is a risk I must take," Laufey says. "I have decided. If I die before siring a child, Loki's child by Fornjot will be my heir. I must be content with having my great-nephew on my throne."

"Sire, Loki does not deserve that honour. He has proven himself untrustworthy. He has sullied our family name."

“I thought you would be happy,” Laufey says. “Has it not always been your goal to intimately link your family to the throne of Jotunheim? Oh I see, only when such a thing is beneficial to you. You are content to secret Loki away with old Angrboda until you can find the best ally to give him to. He is not chattel, and he is not a courtesan. You may be his guardian but I am his king. He is my subject and my kin. You promised him to me, and now I want him. Call him back so he may fulfill his duty to me.”

“Make me your successor.” Helblindi breathes. It’s the first time Helblindi has dared to say it.

“Nephew,” Laufey says tiredly. “You would tear this Realm apart.” He sinks back onto his pillow, his eyes glassy and milky-pink. “Go now, make haste. Fetch Loki.”

Helblindi turns to obey, smouldering with rage. That old fool. He does not deserve the throne.

***

One would think, given Helblindi penchant for scheming, that the fantastic plot came to him in well thought out increments, and only then with great foresight. But in fact, the whole thing was not as predetermined as one would expect. It starts with a lie. A simple lie, intended to cut.

Helblindi arrives at Angrboda’s sometime mid-fall, while the snow is still somewhat traversable. Angrboda meets him at the gate, having known from the beginning that one day Helblindi would be back.

“Who will you give him to?” Angrboda asks, his eyes fixed unwaveringly on Helblindi. He stands in the gate of his Sanctuary, blocking Helblindi’s path.

Helblindi fishes into his satchel and pulls out a small pouch. He holds it up in front of Angrboda, opens it, and then reverses it, spilling the gold coins onto the snow at their feet.

“None of your concern, witch.”

Angrboda does not even blink. “You mean to buy him from me.”

Helblindi leans down, right into crone's face, baring his sharpened teeth.

"He. Is. Not. Yours."

Bullying past him, Helblindi makes his way into the Sanctuary, hewn from the mountain rock itself. He whisks down rugged steps until he finally emerges onto a balconied platform, from which one can look down unto the mammoth inner chamber. It is from there that Helblindi lays eyes on Loki for the first time in ten years.

Loki has grown. His black hair now reaches down his back. He's only a bit taller, but more than that, he seems more upright, more refined. From a somewhat gangly youngling, he has blossomed into the lushness of young adulthood. He's beautiful.

Loki does not see Helblindi at first. He takes a running start from one corner of the chamber and launches himself into what can only be described as a breathtaking tumbling pass: twisting somersaults, cartwheels, flips and turns. Loki lands it with ease, embellishing the finish with a magical flourish of fireworks. Loki laughs madly. The other runts gather around him and join in the fun. Loki tosses his hair effortlessly and grins, saying something to the other runts. One shoves him playfully, and Loki reciprocates in kind. Helblindi watches him like that for awhile. Angrboda comes up from behind to join him.

"He is my shining star," Angrboda says.

Helblindi has to concede Angrboda has done well. Loki had not misused his time here. He'd learnt to wield his natural charms as a weapon. He expects his pick of suitors, looking as he does, moving as he does. He thinks he could enchant any Jotun at court - he'd be right.

Under other circumstances, Helblindi might've delighted in it. It had been his plan, after all, to craft Loki into the paradigm of Jotun desirability. What a cruel reversal of fortune, that now Loki's allure has become such a curse!

For, of all the rivals Helblindi has made at court, Fornjot and his clan are by far Helblindi's most loathsome enemies. Upstarts from the countryside, they'd garnered favour with Laufey for helping put down a small rebellion. Fornjot soon became the darling of Laufey's court, not only for his courage but also his natural charisma. He has a troubling ability to rouse morale amongst Laufey's otherwise downtrodden men. He undermines Helblindi at every turn, and questions Helblindi's advice in front of Laufey. Helblindi's enemies flock to him and voice their support.

Worse, Laufey trusts his council, and grants him honours that should rightfully be Helblindi's. Helblindi hates them all - Ulfr, Fornjot, Laufey and most of all Loki, who could not manage the simple task of keeping his fucking legs closed.

He would rather kill Loki than to give him to that Jotun. The two of them would conspire against him, Helblindi knows it. Once they held power they would run him out of court. Loki would have no duty to obey him anymore. Loki is a disloyal little rat and would probably do anything in his power to hasten Helblindi's downfall. Fornjot, for all his skill on the battlefield, would have no defence against Loki's considerable charms. It makes Helblindi crazy to imagine them in their bed, Loki whispering all manner of intrigue and conspiracy in Fornjot's ear while perched atop his cock.

Helblindi had spent nearly his entire life guarding his runtling brother. To extract no use out of him, none whatsoever, is unbearable. That Loki is destined to be co-regent for his yet unconceived child makes Helblindi want to scream.

Loki finally catches sight of Helblindi through the ice-mirror that makes up the entirety of the Sanctuary's walls. His eyes go wide and he whirls around. His entire body tenses.

Helblindi descends the last of the stairs down to ground level and storms up to Loki. Loki stands his ground, but the other runts around him scatter like cockroaches.

"It's time," Helblindi says without preamble. "Laufey has need of you."

"For what?"

Helbindi is so furious he cannot even bring himself to say it. "We will speak more once we reach home."

By the time they reach their ancestral ice-manor, Helblindi makes up his mind. He will have to kill Loki. How to do it, so as to arouse as little suspicion as possible? Helblindi has become well versed in arcane and dark magics. He could construct a fake-Loki, were he to mangle Loki's actual body a little too enthusiastically. He would have to catch Loki off guard, for Loki has considerable seidr of his own - Angrboda has seen to that. If Loki were to defend himself things could get….messy.

"Does Laufey-King -" Loki pauses, lips curling into a frown, "Want me still?"

“Don’t be stupid. The only one who wants you is the Governor of the Northern Wastelands.”

Helblindi doesn’t know why he says it. It’s an utter lie, and completely contrary to what he’d brought Loki back to do. Not that it matters. Come morning, Loki will be dead.

The way Loki recoils in disgust is massively rewarding. Helblindi can’t resist embellishing.

“Yes, that old codger. You remember? He can’t find a mate up there, they keep dying. Oh, don’t look at me like that, brother. You’re ruined, your inheritance is gone. It’s been ten years since you were sent away. They have all forgotten you. What else did you expect?”

“You said Laufey wanted me,” Loki says sullenly.

“Yes -” Helblindi says, then pauses. An idea comes to mind. A viciously delightful idea. An idea so outlandish, absurd, and fiendish that it verges on fantastical. Better than killing Loki outright by far. One way or the other, it would rid Helblindi of Loki once and for all.

“My brother, how would you like the chance to win your freedom?”

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“I have wanted to tell you for so long. This secret has burdened me more than I could ever say. I have lived these many years in terror that one day I would be exposed. I have contemplated confessing to you, time and time again, just to be free of this weight. But, I was afraid. Can you blame me? I know better than most what lies in store for traitors. I had resigned myself to keep this from you forever….until today. I cannot stay silent now that I know what my brother intends.

“What you have seen is true. I came to Asgard to...to try and ascertain the location of the Casket of Ancient Winters. Helblindi arranged to introduce me to Odin for this purpose, thinking he would make an amenable target. I thought when Odin fell into sleep that I would be able to come home,

my mission too compromised to continue. But Helblindi abandoned me in Asgard to fend for myself. Now I see why - he never intended for me to return to Jotunheim alive.

"That was when I passed into your hands. I knew you wanted to - to hurt me, because of who I was to Odin. I knew I'd have to lay with you and it made me afraid. I was simply trying to *survive* you, then; I did whatever I could think to do lessen your hatred towards me. I molded myself into whatever you wanted. I thought that, if only I could make myself become your favourite, then maybe I could earn your trust. That maybe you'd confide in me your secrets. In this, I succeeded. I succeeded beyond my wildest expectations.

"For I had the chance to accomplish what I came here to do. You brought the Casket to Asgard to save me, as Helblindi knew you would, and you trusted me with it even though I am a Jotun runt. I held it in my hands: my people's most holy relic, an artifact more valuable than all the treasures in your vault combined. I could have escaped with it. I could have slipped through a wormhole, secreted myself far away to some remote corner of Jotunheim where you'd never be able to find me. But I couldn't - couldn't leave you. Not because I feared retaliation, nor because I was loathe to give up the trappings of luxury that my life with you affords. No. Things had changed between us. I am not sure when or how it happened. You would sometimes let your guard down, forgetting yourself; you let me see you as you are. You showed me kindnesses. And found I hated you less. I recognized in you the same loneliness that I saw in myself. I took comfort in you when I had no one else, as you did in me.

"The truth is that I don't want to go back to Jotunheim. I want to stay here in Asgard, with you. I want to have this child with you. I want to raise it in Asgard and give it a proper home. I *chose* you, do you understand? I chose you despite everything that has transpired between us. I chose you despite knowing that I may live forever in bondage, and that you'd eventually have to set me aside to secure your dynastic line. I chose you over my own freedom, and whatever riches might have awaited me in Jotunheim. And do you know why? Because I know you're good, deep down; I have told you so before and I meant it. You want to be a just and merciful king. And I…..I think you love me. I can think of no other reason why you've kept me for so long.

"I realize what I have done is high treason. I hope my coming to you now is proof enough of my loyalty. And I hope - perhaps naively - that you'll show me mercy. But I must beg you - whatever you do to me, please, *please,* don't hurt our child."

Loki lets out a shaky breath. There it is. The secret he'd swore to himself he'd take to his death.

Thor sits beside him on the couch, his eyes fixed straight ahead, his face blank and expressionless.

"Thor?" Loki shakes Thor's forearm gently. Thor is unresponsive, as if in a trance. There is growing static in the air. The hairs on Loki's forearm stand on end. Loki is overcome with the

sudden, dreadful feeling that he has just made a horrible mistake.

Loki shakes Thor a bit more firmly. His voice cracks. “Say something, please.”

Silence hangs in the air. Thor stands abruptly, ripping himself out of Loki’s grasp.

“If it is as you say then Helblindi must be stopped. I must make haste.” He strides over to where Mjolnir is resting and takes her in hand.

“You’re leaving?” says Loki, bewildered. He rises to follow him. Thor’s pace is so brisk Loki has to trot to keep up. “Can’t we - can we talk?”

Thor is already at the open balcony. He starts swinging Mjolnir, as he does when he’s about to lift off.

“Thor, wait -”

Thor glances at him over his shoulder, casting Loki a look that stops him in his tracks. A look of - *hurt,* rage - it is too brief to tell. Before Loki can say anything else, Thor is gone.

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The next few hours pass in agony. Rain pelts against the window as storms rage outside. Loki paces a rut into the floor. He contemplates fleeing; he could still run now that he has done his duty and warned Thor of Helblindi’s intentions. Surely Loki has the most lavish jewelry collection in all of Asgard; he could easily sell it off to pay his way. It might be difficult to get off-Realm in such a hurry, but Loki knows there are smugglers who specialize in that sort of thing, especially when the stowaway has gold enough to make it worth their while.

Something keeps him in Asgard. His feet are like lead.

The great audience hall is in a flurry. Thor’s counsellors and friends whisper anxiously amongst themselves and cast leery glances at Loki. They can tell something is amiss, having been abruptly deprived of the King’s presence mid-meeting at Loki’s behest. For a King to disappear to Norns-

know-where without informing anyone of where he was going or when he'd be back? Quite suspicious, to say the least. Nor is Loki exactly forthcoming with an explanation; he mumbles something about how Thor will explain all when he returns. Loki can't bring himself to confess. His secret will be exposed soon enough. Disgrace is a funny thing to be concerned about at a time like this, with a traitor's fate looming over his head. It's just that….Loki had struggled to cultivate some respectability with these people. They never got over his origins. What a delicious scandal this will make; they will surely eat it right up. The King's favourite was a traitor all along!

Thor returns with a thunderous boom. His friends surround him at once.

"Your Majesty!"

"What happened?"

"The traitor Helblindi of Jotunheim has raided the secret keep of Dunyr and has taken possession of the Casket of Ancient Winters," Thor says, panting. His hair is wet from the storm and water drips off him in rivulets. "I did not arrive in time to stop him."

Gasps are heard all around, which Loki can barely make out through the blood rushing in his ears. His knees suddenly feel weak.

"Ambassador Helblindi? Of Jotunheim?" exclaims Sif.

Thor nods gravely. "The same."

"That is *impossible*," says Fandral.

"How could Helblindi have ascertained such a thing? There are billions of moons!" says Volstagg.

Thor casts a searing gaze on Loki. "It's not important. What's important is that Helblindi must be stopped before he gains enough power to overthrow Laufey. We must take back the Casket as soon as possible before that can happen."

This tells Loki two things: the first is that Thor does not intend to have him publicly arrested. The

second is that, for whatever reason, Thor is choosing to keep Loki's secret.

"Then we must assemble our forces and make haste to Jotunheim!" exclaims Volstagg. "Such an affront to Asgard cannot go unpunished. We have for too long been deprived of the glory of battle."

Thor shakes his head. "No time. Our forces are unprepared to venture out into Jotunheim's frozen wastes. We would need at least a week to outfit them in suitable kit, and by then it would certainly be too late. Moreover, to march an army into Jotunheim could be construed as an act of war. We need Laufey's help; we cannot afford to rouse his ire. I will go seek an audience with Laufey myself. He will have to consent if I come bearing a white flag of truce. Sif, and the Warriors Three - you shall come with me."

"Let me come too then," Loki interjects. "I know - I know the ways of the Frost Giants. I know how to reach Utgard, Laufey's Hall. Let me come and help."

Loki says it because he feels like he has to do *something*, to fix it somehow, to undo the mess that he'd been responsible for.

Thor glares at him. His jaw clenches.

"Yes," he says eventually. "Loki shall accompany us. Make haste my friends - we leave within the hour."

The crowds begin to disperse, murmuring ominously. Thor turns, but Loki catches him by the arm before he can leave.

"Thor…" he starts, but then finds he can't think of anything to say.

Thor just looks Loki up and down, his expression flat.

"You should change," he says tonelessly, "Lest you sully your pretty clothes."

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They set off on horseback at a brisk pace across the Rainbow Bridge. Their destination: the gilded Observation Tower, where he Bifrost connects Asgard to all the Realms of Yggdrasil's tree. As soon as they arrive and dismount, Thor calls for the guardians of the Observatory to summon the Bifrost. They hasten to obey, though they seem confused by Thor's chosen destination. No Asgardian has set foot on Jotunheim since the Great War, when Odin apprehended the Casket of Ancient Winters and pushed the Jotun invasion back, effectively imprisoning the Frost Giants on their own planet.

The six of them arrange themselves on the center platform of the Observatory, where the Bifrost's beams will touchdown to carry them away. The Observatory hums around them as the machinery awakens. Gears groan with strain as they begin to chug into action. The floor underneath their feet shakes and rumbles.

Loki tries to catch Thor's eye, but Thor refuses to look at him. Having Thor not respond to him is worse than facing his anger outright. Anger, Loki could understand. He could work with that. Loki has dealt with Thor's fury before. It's this silent treatment Loki can't stand. It makes him feel listless, antsy. He wants to throw himself at Thor and demand to be acknowledged. For Thor to do something. *Anything.*

"Can you say something?" Loki asks, softly.

Thor just stares grimly ahead in silence. Loki abandons the hope that he'll respond. But he does, eventually. His voice is so low and hoarse that only Loki can hear it - and barely even then.

"I defended you. I raised you up. I refused to marry, for you. I wanted so desperately to believe -" Thor's voice trails off. "They all thought me a fool. I suppose they were right."

And they are swallowed up in a blaze of light.

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Loki lands inelegantly on his native Realm. The journey over Bifrost was more turbulent than he remembered. He'd been younger when he'd last crossed it….and less pregnant. Loki's vision swims and he immediately is overcome with dizziness. The first thing he does on his native soil is crouch down and throw up into the snow.

“Loki!”

It’s not Thor who comes over but Fandral, who likewise crouches down beside him. Fandral puts his hand on Loki’s back. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” says Loki, spitting out the foul taste. What a time to be overcome with morning sickness.

Loki gathers himself peers around. The landscape is bleak, blanketed by patches of snow and tundra. They’ve landed on a cliff overlooking the ocean, where cresting waves pummel the shoreline and spray a mist of salty water in the air. To the south of them are snow-capped mountains. Loki can tell by the colour of the rock and the species of blue-crested nesting seabird that they must be somewhere on the northern coast. Loki recognizes this place. There is a harbor town nearby, protected from the vicious seas by a outcrop of rock. Just over the horizon Loki can make out the smoke from their chimneys. The town is where he and Helblindi would dock their ship whenever they’d travel to and from Laufey’s court. Loki is overwhelmed with nostalgia and long-dormant homesickness. Even the feel of the fresh, biting wind brings back old memories.

Thor looks around, unimpressed. He curls his lips into a frown. “Which way from here?”

“Would you give him a minute?” Fandral says angrily, his hand still on Loki’s back.

“I’m fine,” Loki repeats. He stands shakily, but accepts Fandral’s help to get to his feet. “Um, Utgard is south of here. Past the mountains. Not far.”

Thor squints at him. “How far is far?”

“A day’s march, I think.” Loki has to guess, because he’d only ever made the trip via sled, like any other respectable Jotun noble. Loki points to the mountain range. “There is a road through the pass that will lead us there. This time of year it should still be quite clear.”

“That will take too long. I must speak to Laufey as soon as possible.”

“We could make our way to the village then,” Loki points in the direction of the smoke columns. “Ask for mounts to take us to Utgard. By boar-steed it should only take an hour or two.”

“No,” Thor says.

“Well, what do you expect us to do? We cannot fly there!” exclaims Volstagg.

“You can’t. I can,” Thor says, untucking Mjolnir from his belt. “You will meet me there. Make haste to the village and request mounts. I will take Loki.”

“And you expect them to help us?” Sif says. “Four lone Asgardians on Jotunn soil?”

“Tell them you are under the protection of the House of Nal, and that they will be well-compensated for their pains,” Loki assures her. “They will help you.”

The Warriors Three and Sif exchange looks. Thor just stares at him. Loki tilts his chin up in an attempt to convey a confidence he doesn’t fully feel. He has no idea what weight his father’s name carries around here these days.

Eventually, the four of them accept the plan with a shrug.

“Best of luck, then,” says Volstagg. “Try not to die.”

“And you as well, friend. I will meet you at Utgard,” Thor says, clasping Volstagg’s forearm. He repeats this gesture to Sif, Hogun, and Fandral in turn, before he finally comes to Loki.

Gripping Loki tightly by the waist, Thor begins to swing Mjolnir. His warmth against Loki is welcome, reassuring, although his embrace is only perfunctory. Loki clings to him regardless, and they lift off.

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They land outside the magnificent ice-gates of Utgard, Laufey’s ancestral seat a short while later, having crossed over the mountains and plains of Jotunheim with unrivaled speed. Still nauseous from the Bifrost trip, Loki immediately curls over and gags. Nothing comes up, but this time at

least Thor puts in a token effort to comfort him.

"No more flying," Loki jokes dryly as he straightens himself. He thinks he sees a ghost of a smile tug on Thor's lips - though it might just be his imagination.

Thor cranes his neck to peer up at the spires of the palace that stretch interminably into the grey sky. It makes Loki simmer with pride to behold Thor's wonder. His homeland isn't necessarily the backwater the other Realms think it is.

Thor looks at him askance. His nose and cheeks are bright pink from the wind, and frost clings to his beard. "This is…...where you grew up?"

Loki nods slowly. Loki can tell Thor's having difficulty reformulating everything he's ever known about him. Loki feels bad for all the lies he's had to tell Thor. He'd invented so many stories about his past - not just to cover his tracks, but also because he genuinely enjoyed Thor's attention and sympathy. Some stories were based on Loki's lived experiences, but so many were outright fabrications. Loki is, and always was, a masterful storyteller. He never intended for Thor to find out the truth. He certainly didn't set out to make Thor feel like a fool.

Sentries from the gate approach, having been alerted by the commotion their landing made. They raise their shields and spears as soon as they catch sight of Thor and Loki's decidedly un-blue skins.

"Peace," Thor says, holding up his hand. "I seek and audience with Laufey-King. It is urgent."

The guard bares his teeth. "And who are you to think that you will be received, *Asgardian?*"

"I am Thor Odinson, King of Asgard, God of Thunder, and liege lord of all Nine Realms."

The guards do not lower their spears. They look them over, but do not recognize Loki, as they surely would if Loki's heritage lines were showing.

"What king comes with no retinue?"

“A king who comes in peace and earnestness,” says Thor. He steps forward, Mjolnir in hand, though he does not brandish her threateningly. “You know I am who I say because I alone can wield Mjolnir the Star-Hammer.” He sets Mjolnir down and backs up again, knowing full well no one would be able to take her. “I leave her here outside your gates so that you will be assured my intentions are not hostile.”

The guards exchange glances. One advances and wraps his giant hand around Mjolnir’s handle. He strains to lift her, first with one hand and then with two. Although he is much larger and taller than Thor, Mjolnir does not budge. The guard gives up with a huff, his red eyes narrowed on Thor.

“Follow us,” he says.

Thor and Loki fall into step behind the guards as they make their way through the magnificent gates. The Jotun of Utgard gather to watch them pass mostly in silence, though some hiss or mutter curses. To his credit, Thor keeps his head fixed ahead and does not acknowledge their insults. Not that he is unaffected, either. His eyes dart about, taking in the strangeness of his surroundings. He has surely never seen anything like Utgard before. Thor has travelled to many of the neighbouring Realms, but they are nothing like Jotunheim.

It is so deeply unnerving to be back here, among his own kind, in a place Loki once called home. Loki used to play here, in this very courtyard, as a young Jotun newly debuted at court. He used to practice his magic and make mischief, as was his wont. And his uncle would turn a blind eye, as he was likewise wont. Loki even recognizes a few of the guards and attendants now gawking at him, though he is not recognized in return. So much has remained unchanged here. And yet even so, Loki senses the undercurrent of mourning, of decay and depletion. This place is dying. Jotunheim is wasting away; Helblindi hadn’t been lying about that.

At last, they are lead into Laufey’s cavernous hall. The familiarity of it punches Loki in the gut. It even smells the same. Thor takes in the sight with wide eyes. And it is impressive: the glittering walls curve upwards towards the Icicle Ceiling, the pride of Utgard. Although, a few of the larger icicles seemed to have chipped off since Loki was here last.

There, at the opposite end of the hall, Laufey sits atop his throne of ice. He is much as Loki remembers, though he seems shrunken, haggard. Laufey peers down at Thor with curiosity, but his eyes graze over Loki with comparatively little interest. There is no recognition in his face either. Without his heritage lines, Loki is just a stranger to him.

Beside Laufey sits Farbauti, Laufey’s third mate. Sturlungar clan, Loki can tell right away. He’s a half-runt with wary, flashing eyes. Like Loki, he’s visibly pregnant. Loki tries to imagine himself in Farbauti’s position but finds he can’t.

“Odinson,” Laufey says gruffly.

“Laufey-King.” Thor nods his head in acknowledgement. Loki likewise bows low. “It is an honour to meet you at last.”

“The honour is mine, to finally welcome the King of all the Realms to my humble Hall.” Laufey motions to the room surrounding them. His tone is dry. Loki knows his uncle well enough, even after so many years apart, to sense that this meeting will probably not go over well.

“Hardly humble. The hall of Utgard is truly a sight to behold. As is the rest of your Realm.”

Laufey’s face remains flat. “You come unexpectedly.”

“Yes,” acknowledges Thor, “My most heartfelt thanks for receiving us. I realize my coming here without formal announcement is most unorthodox, but this could not wait. Time is of the essence, so I must be direct. Jotunheim is in danger, as is the security of your throne. A threat grows within your borders. I have come both to warn you, and to ask for your help in quashing it.”

“So generous of you, Thor-King, to take an interest in Jotunheim’s fate, at last.”

This time, the sarcasm is too thick for even Thor to miss. Thor’s brow furrows in confusion. It occurs to Loki, suddenly, that for all his posturing Thor doesn’t really know what he’s doing. He thought he’d receive a hero’s welcome here, barging in like this with ill news. Thor is unused to been greeted with nothing but adulation everywhere he goes. But they are not in Asgard. They are not in the friendly realms of Vanaheim or Alfheim. This is *Jotunheim.* Loki can’t say he is surprised at the frosty reception. He’d grown up in the wake of the war, after all. He should have perhaps warned Thor that this might happen, but in truth, he hadn’t really thought that far ahead.

“I care for all the Realms in my charge,” Thor says, squaring his shoulders defensively, the idiot. “I would not have come if I did not.”

Laufey narrows his red eyes. "*Indeed*. Tell me then, the nature of this threat you speak of.”

“Your nephew Helblindi has acquired the Casket of Ancient Winters and means to use it to make

war on you."

The hall falls silent. Laufey laughs, growl-like, the sound gravelly and rough, echoing off the walls.

"The Casket of Ancient Winters," Laufey repeats. "The one Asgard stole from us in the Great War, and has used to keep Jotunheim in subjugation?"

"Er - yes," Thor says. "Taken, by Helblindi, whose powers grow stronger with each passing moment. I realize this is shocking news. The treachery of one's kin is no trifling matter. But the truth is that Helblindi has been planning this for years. It has only just recently become known to me. I would not have believed it, except for that I witnessed it myself. I saw Helblindi escape with Casket. He was too swift for me to stop. We have good reason to believe he is here, in your Realm, preparing to launch an attack."

"I see," Laufey says. "And you….require my aid to stop him?"

Thor tilts his head up. "So that peace can be maintained in your Realm."

Laufey nods consideringly and makes a humming noise. "Or do you come because you fear that, with Helblindi in power in Jotunheim, you will not be able to control him as you do me?"

Thor blinks. "That's not - no. You must understand. Jotunheim is in *danger.* "

"I heard you, Odinson."

"We must act at once."

"Must we."

"*Yes,"* Thor is getting frustrated now. "Don't you care? Or do you refuse to take a fellow King at his word?"

Laufey sighs heavily. “I am not the fool you take me for, Thor-King. There are many vultures in my court, circling overhead for their prey to weaken enough to strike. Helblindi’s treasonous nature is no surprise to me; I have long sensed that corruption within him. I sent him to you for a reason: to rid myself of his meddlesome presence for awhile. Even then he was too powerful for me to exile outright. That is not the issue at hand. You come to me, asking my help, as if we were friends and allies. You are yet young, so perhaps that is the source of your folly. You do not remember the Great War as I do. You were content to sit in luxury in Asgardia for decades, while turning a blind eye to the suffering of the subjects in your charge. My question is: Why should I believe that you care about Jotunheim now?”

Thor falters, his tongue at last failing him. Laufey is right and they both know it.

Loki is roused to action.

“Thor-King speaks the truth. He is here to help you, not out of his own self-interest, but because you are the rightful king of Jotunheim. Helblindi has set out not only to overthrow you but to destroy this Realm and every Realm that stands in his path. I believe he has retreated to his ancestral stronghold on the eastern shore to gather his energies for this purpose.”

Laufey narrows his red eyes as he fixes them on Loki. “And you are?”

“I am Loki.” Loki swallows tightly. “Your nephew.”

Laufey’s face flashes, morphing from thinly veiled contempt to outright fury.

“My nephew Loki,” Laufey hisses, “Is *dead.”*

“You were deceived by Helblindi the betrayer, for I am he. Uncle, hear what I say. You and I have both been tricked by Helblindi, entangled in his plot as flies in a spider’s web. Thor and I have come hither to save Jotunheim, and its people, to whom we owe our protection.”

“How dare you assume Loki’s identity!” Laufey cries. “You dishonour his memory by involving him in this farce!”

“I swear I am he,” Loki says. “Helblindi faked my death to deceive you. All this time I have been alive in Asgard. Under Thor-King’s care.”

Laufey looks them both over, sneering. “Your servant is bold, Thor-King. And as talented a storyteller as you are. Tell me, *Loki,”* he bares his teeth, “What is your favourite sweet.”

Loki is momentarily wonders what that has to do with anything. Then he realizes what this is: a test.

“Candied peel,” Loki responds, thinking back to what his childhood self would answer, long before he’d tasted the succulent delicacies of Asgard.

“Ah, too easy. What was the name of your nurse.”

“Helgi suckled me, but Gunni raised me.”

“And when you set my stable on fire, leading to the escape of my favourite mount Dagni, where did you finally find her?”

“I found *Dagrun* on the Fields of Skjeve,” Loki corrects. “Three days later.”

Laufey scowls at him, unconvinced, so Loki shifts tactics.

“Watch,” Loki says. He performs a complex flourishing gesture and whispery silver smoke begins to emanate from his fingertips. The smoke congeals into a familiar, tangible shape: Loki’s rabbit totem, as iridescent and splendid as ever. Gathering it in his arms, Loki outstretches it towards Laufey demonstratively. The rabbit squirms in Loki’s grasp and kicks its legs. It knows where they are. It’s happy to be home. Loki sets it down and it begins to sniff and run about, leaving a trail of ethereal light in its wake. Loki allows this for a moment or two before he summons it back to him. The rabbit sits on its haunches at Loki’s feet, its little nose wiggling madly. Loki picks the rabbit up and dissolves it into a shimmering cloud.

Laufey shifts in his throne, looking much less smug than he did mere moments before. He considers Loki with new eyes. There must be something of Loki’s Jotun self he recognizes, perhaps in Loki’s voice or bearing or bone structure.

“We watched Loki burn,” he says. The other Jotun nod and murmur in agreement.

“That was a decoy Helblindi constructed to dupe you. He hid me by bleaching my skin, masking my lines. Helblindi sought to use me to determine the location of the Casket. Which he has. And he will overthrow you, Uncle. That is what has brought us here before you.”

Laufey turns to his advisor, a wizened old runtling witch whose name Loki can’t remember.

“Is such a thing possible? This - bleaching?”

“I have heard of such a spell,” says the witch.

“Can it be reversed?”

“Yes, but I must warn you, the effects of an unbleaching spell would be permanent. And -” the witch turns to Loki, “If you prove to be an imposter, the spell will kill you.”

“I am no imposter.” Loki says fiercely.

“Then you have nothing to fear,” Laufey says. “If you are Loki, as you claim, then prove it once and for all.”

Loki looks to Thor, uncertain. If the unbleaching spell is permanent, he’ll be in his Jotun skin forever. He is not sure how Thor would feel about that.

“You hesitate,” Laufey comments.

Thor’s eyes are unreadable. Gravely, he nods at Loki.

Loki turns back to Laufey to meet his challenge. He clenches his jaw.

“Do it,” Loki says.

In short order Laufey's most skilled sorcerers are summoned to aid with the spell. One of them presents a large leather-bound tome to the head witch, who takes it and flips purposefully through its yellowed pages.

"Yes," the witch murmurs, stopping on a particular page. He caresses the vellum. "Yes, I see." He approaches Loki carrying the open book in one arm. "Are you certain you wish to do this?"

"Yes."

"I must stress….if your skin is not truly Jotun, it will likely burn away completely." The witch pauses. "You will be flayed alive."

Loki refuses to let himself be dissuaded. It's not like he's lying. He *is* Jotun. He swallows down the knot in his stomach. This couldn't possibly be worse than being bleached in the first place.

The witch acquiesces. "Then we will proceed. I shall...try my best to not make this painful for you."

He motions for the other sorcerers to gather. He tries to shoo Thor out of the way, but Thor does not budge from where he stands. The witch is a runt shorter even than Loki, so Thor positively towers over him.

"You better take care, witch," Thor warns lowly. There is no mistaking the undercurrent of threat in his tone. The witch nods slowly and Thor backs down to give them room enough to operate.

The other sorcerers take their places around Loki, five in total plus the head witch, forming a perfect hexagon. They raise their hands towards Loki and the head witch begins to chant from the book. Blue-green seidr soon materializes at Loki's feet. This is a kind of magic Loki is not familiar with, having only encountered it when the bleaching spell had first been performed on him. He'd been so scared then. Truthfully, he is scared now.

Loki's eyes briefly flit to Thor's. He doesn't know whether he should feel heartened or unsettled by the fear he likewise sees in Thor's face.

The chanting intensifies, as does the potency of the magic being summoned. The wisps of seidr gather velocity as they circle around Loki, taking on a whirlwind formation. The seidr becomes more and more opaque as it picks up speed, climbing upwards over Loki's body until he can no longer see anything past it at all. Nor can Loki move - the rush of magic encircling him keeps him locked firmly in place. It becomes so powerful that Loki's heels start to lift off the ground. It's cold, the coldest sensation Loki's ever felt. So cold it feels like it's burning. Loki panics. He doesn't think he can take it. He thrashes futilely, but the whirlwind is unyielding. Loki needs for it to stop. He can't take it. He can't take it. Loki screams.

In a moment of climax, the spell reaches its natural conclusion. The burning-cold stops all at once. The whirlwind dissipates in a violent rush and Loki is dropped to the ground like a ragdoll. Loki's so stunned he hardly even registers crumpling to the ground; he must have blacked out for a moment. When Loki manages to open his eyes, it's Thor's blurry face that fills his field of vision. Thor's eyes are wide, and when Loki gazes down at his own hands and forearms, they are blue.

Disorientated, Loki gratefully accepts Thor's help to get him to his feet. It's the first tenderness Thor has shown since Loki revealed his secret. Loki mumbles a discreet thank you. His skin residually prickles all over, but the horrid burning sensation has at least ebbed away.

"*Loki,"* Laufey gasps, rising from his throne. "Little Rabbit, we believed you dead."

Loki smiles, wan.

"I suppose I was."

"You have been in Asgard," Laufey says, striding down the steps from the royal dias. He takes Loki's shoulders in his giant hands, as if to convince himself that Loki is real. "All this time? Tell me how it came to pass. Tell me *everything*."

Loki does, glossing over the more sordid parts of his story. Being here in this place stirs up old feelings of shame. He hates admitting what he'd been reduced to in his time in captivity, the debasement of his royal flesh. Thor may not have been kind at times but he'd only ever treated Loki as a prince would a slave. It's not Thor's fault he didn't know Loki was royalty.

When Loki finishes, Laufey's red eyes are wide and aghast.

"You were willing to risk your life to save Jotunheim? On my behalf?"

“I -” Loki stammers. It was perhaps more complicated than that. Loki was not unselfish in his motives. He’d been young then, impulsive, and brimming with anger. He’d have done anything if it meant freedom from Helblindi’s grasp. The fate of Jotunheim was never exactly his primary concern.

Laufey’s eyes sink lower. “You’re with child.”

Loki blushes a deep violet. His eyes flash to Thor’s tellingly, and Laufey follows his gaze.

“I see,” Laufey says.

Thor clears his throat. “It is very good to see your family reunited. But we must address the matter at hand. Time is pressing. We must stop Helblindi before he accrues enough power to destroy this realm. You see now what we say is true.”

Laufey turns to Thor. His face goes hard.

“Yes, I see the truth, O noble, King of Asgard. You think yourself so high above us, a race of uncivilized monsters. You, who have dishonoured my nephew, and kept him as your thrall, in a state far below the dignity of his birth. You, who have used Loki to slake your lust, and have begot in him your illegitimate child. Loki is my kin, my blood, and Helblindi had no right to do to him what he did. You acquired him under false pretenses, and therefore have no true claim to him. I take him back. Loki, come.”

Loki freezes, looking over to Thor, who looks back at him with equal bewilderment. Neither of them had anticipated this. Loki is not sure where he stands with Thor, but he’s certain he can’t leave him.

“I can’t,” Loki says weakly.

“Your place is here, Loki. With your kin, your people.”

Laufey says this not unkindly. He means to save him. What he does not know is that Loki does not want to be saved.

Loki shakes his head. “Not anymore.”

Laufey looks between the two of them discernfully. “So that is where your loyalty lays,” he says at last, as if to himself. He straightens to his full height, and his voice turns grave. “Very well. If that is your wish then I will not try to convince you otherwise. But the matter remains. I see no reason to help Asgard reclaim the Casket. The Casket is rightfully ours. I would rather it lay in Jotunn hands, even if that Jotun is Helblindi.”

Loki can’t believe what he is hearing, that Laufey would let Helblindi get away with everything he has done!

“Uncle, *no.* You do not understand what Helblindi intends….his capacity for magic. I saw into his mind. I know him. He will destroy everything. He will overthrow you. You must heed our warning. You must *do something*.”

“You have been gone many years, Loki. Many tragedies and hardships have befallen us in your absence. Fate does not smile on my reign; my scryers have told me as much. I must accept that my time may be coming to an end. Helblindi has proven himself more cunning, more devious, and more capable than any of us. I lost the Casket, and he has restored it. Helblindi has done what I could not. If he overthrows me, then perhaps it is the will of Fate. He deserves to reign, and I shall not impede him. You would be wise, Little Rabbit, to take your King and go home to Asgard while you still can, lest you and your child fall victim to his wrath.”

“Uncle -”

Laufey waves his hand dismissively. “Whatever shall come to pass, shall come to pass.”

“May we parley in private, Laufey-King?” Thor offers, more a plea than Loki’s ever heard him make. “Perhaps you and I could come to an understanding.”

Laufey heaves a sigh. The ancient custom of parley between kings - even enemy kings - is sacrosanct. It would be in poor taste to refuse.

“Very well.”

Laufey motions to a door behind the ice throne, one which leads to a private antechamber. Thor ascends the steps up the royal dias and follows Laufey out of the throne room. The door behind them closes with a soft thud, leaving Loki once again alone to stew with worry. He stares at the door long after they've left and prays Thor won't do something rash.

"May I offer you some milk?"

Loki turns. It is Farbauti. He presents a serving tray with a pitcher of yak's milk and a glass. Loki accepts out of politeness and takes a tentative sip. Ugh, it even tastes the same.

"You are Loki," Farbauti says, awed. "Laufey-king spoke of you often."

Loki catches himself judging Farbauti's heritage lines, comparing them to his own and finding Farbauti's lacking in comparison. He chides himself: why does that matter at a time like this?

"Good things I hope."

Farbauti smiles ruefully. "None of us could ever compare."

Loki doesn't know what to say to that.

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The two kings reemerge some time later. As soon as the door creaks open, all heads turn upwards and the din of noise fades to silence.

"I have had a change of heart," Laufey announces. "Thor-King will challenge Helblindi in battle, in the hopes that he is yet weak enough to be neutralized. I will equip his endeavor with battalions, ships, scouts and provisions, but Loki will remain here as my hostage until Thor-King returns with the Casket, along with the traitor Helblindi's head."

This is almost more upsetting a decision than not meeting in battle at all.

“No one has been wronged by Helblindi more than me!” Loki cries. “Let me have my revenge! Let me face him!”

“*No*.”

Thor barks it so sharply it startles Loki. Thor strides over purposefully.

“You stay here,” he says, then softens, cupping Loki’s cheek. “I will return. I will come back for you. Stay here.”

He lingers like that for a moment, with an expression Loki can’t place, tender and fierce all at once. Thor opens his mouth, like he is going to say something else, but then he doesn’t. When he pulls his hand away Loki still senses the ghost of warmth on his cheek.

The weight of Laufey’s large palm presses down on Loki’s shoulder from behind, gently holding him back. Loki can do nothing but watch helplessly as Thor turns to exit, his red cape billowing behind him. Every fibre of Loki’s being urges him to follow, yet he remains rooted to the spot.

“Gods be with ye, Odinson,” says Laufey.

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Laufey organizes a ramshackle feast to celebrate Loki’s return from the dead. The fare is not as delicious as Loki remembers. Perhaps his palette had grown accustomed to the rich diet of the Asgardian court. Perhaps Jotunheim’s dwindling resources make for a less-than-impressive spread. Loki pushes his food around on his plate aimlessly. He wants to go home. But then he reminds himself he *is* home. His true home. Funny, it doesn’t feel like it.

“A draught for your child,” Laufey offers.

Loki hesitates. Not that he thinks his uncle would poison him, exactly; that would accomplish nothing. But one can’t fault him for being a little paranoid these days.

Laufey rolls his eyes and offers it to Faurbauti, who dutifully takes a sip without question.

Loki then accepts the draught and downs the rest of it in a single go. It tastes vaguely fishy.

“And when are you due?”

“Er, midwinter, they think. It is hard to say given the mixed parentage.”

“How fitting - a winter babe from winter blood. He will be due come fall,” Laufey gestures at Farbauti, “If he survives that long.”

“Prosperity and Fertility,” says Loki.

“I had heard Thor-King had found himself a runtling mate. But, news from the other realms is not exactly forthcoming. It is difficult to discern what is truth and what is rumor. I am sorry I was not more….conscious of Helblindi’s treachery. That he’d done such a despicable thing to you...”

“You couldn’t have known. I was fooled as well. It was only because of a corrupt Bridge spell that I was able to discover Helblindi’s true intentions.”

Laufey keeps staring at him. Loki pretends not to notice, and takes a biteful of salty fish just to give him something else to focus on.

“You have grown, Little Rabbit,” Laufey says wistfully.

Loki is reminded that Laufey had not seen him alive since before he’d been sent to Angroboda’s - over fifteen years ago. He’d been little more than a youngling, then. Far too young to be betrothed, let alone bear young. He is outraged on behalf of his younger self, that Helblindi would push a match when he was far from ready. it is deeply unsettling to be back here, in his Uncle’s presence, his erstwhile intended. How different his life would have been if he’d stayed in Jotunheim.

“It has been a long time,” Loki agrees.

“Too long away from home. In a foreign land. At our enemy’s mercy. You must have been terribly

afraid."

Loki takes another bite, even as his stomach roils in protest. This conversation, much like the food, suits him ill.

"At times."

"Tell me about Odin. He didn't -"

"No," Loki answers quickly. "Never. We never - He was weak, when I met him. Lonely. Hardly even able to walk on his own. Just a sad, old man."

"Good," Laufey breathes. He clearly relishes the idea of his ancient enemy wasting away in old age. "I shudder to think of his hands on you."

"He never mistreated me," Loki says firmly, because he feels he has to.

"And his son?"

Loki frowns, patting his stomach. That answer is a little more complex.

"Thor was - is, difficult, at times. I won't pretend otherwise. But, he's changed. He's different now."

"You have tamed him," Laufey says. "He cares for you."

Loki huffs out a laugh. That may have been true once. Loki is not so sure anymore.

"Enough to stay his hand when my secret came to light. Although…." Loki pauses. "Mostly, I think he spared me to save himself the embarrassment of admitting he was wrong about me."

Laufey's eyes glint. "Is that what you think?"

What Loki thinks, he won't say aloud: *I think I broke Thor's heart.*

"Should Helblindi be defeated, I will need somewhere to stay," Loki says instead, gathering himself. "My hope is that you will house me."

"You always have a place in my hall, Loki."

"My child as well. I'll not kill it."

"I would never ask you to. But, do you not wish to return to Asgard?"

Loki shakes his head. "I don't think that will be possible."

The recent whirlwind of events hadn't given Loki enough time to fully consider his next step. But, the more he dwells on it, the more he convinces himself that staying in Jotunheim might be the best possible resolution to his situation. Laufey is not the vengeful monster Helblindi made him out to be; he doesn't seem resentful over losing Loki's blood-blessing those many years ago. Moreover, with Helblindi dead, Loki would be their family's heir by forfeit. He'd get his estates back, as he always wanted. Loki ignores the pang in his chest at the prospect.

"That's not what I asked," Laufey says. His lips twitch. "Forgive me for my confusion. I offered you a chance to return to me, to be free of Asgard, but you refused. You said your place was not in Jotunheim any longer. This, I accepted. Yet now you ask me for lodging?"

"I-" Loki starts. In truth he's more than a little confused himself. So much has happened in so little time.

"You would go if he'd take you," Laufey says knowingly. "That is what you mean."

Loki can only nod.

“You care for Odinson in return.”

Loki swallows dryly and averts his eyes. “Does that disappoint you, Uncle?”

“No. It gladdens my heart that you have found a semblance of happiness, even after all the misfortune that have befallen you.” Laufey smiles softly. “He should be so lucky as to have you.”

“You should have let me go with him into battle.” Loki says bitterly.

“I understand your reasons for wanting to do so, and I sympathize. But under the present conditions, that was not possible.”

“I’m not so delicate. I have grown strong, Uncle! I have been training under the best sorcerers in the Realms. I could be of *use*.” Loki’s voice turns acrid. He pokes at his food sullenly. “Yet I linger here.”

“You were always gifted in the arts of magic; I do not doubt your skill. Your battle-readiness did not factor into my reasoning. Rather, I need you here so I have assurance that Thor will not abscond to Asgard with the Casket, should he manage to defeat Helblindi.”

“He wouldn’t,” breathes Loki, although in truth he isn’t sure. There wouldn’t be much reason for Thor not to do exactly that.

“I could not be certain. Asgard has not been a friend to our realm, and its new king is....an unknown quantity. I would be a fool not to set terms. But, Thor was adamant. He wanted my blessing to have you. It was the central tenet of our alliance.”

“Alliance?”

“Yes, the one which will be sealed one Thor gifts the Casket to me in exchange for your hand in marriage.”

Loki's voice is small. “Wh-what?”

“You seem surprised, nephew,” Laufey's eyes glimmer. “Thor-King suggested it himself. To ‘right the wrong that was done to you and restore your honour’, he said. I expressed doubt but he swore his love for you, and moreover that he would willingly return the Casket to its rightful home to prove it. Are you not pleased?”

Loki’s throat is so tight it is hard to form words. Thor wants him still. Thor loves him.

Tears well in Loki’s eyes. “No, Uncle. It pleases me more than anything.”

Laufey sits back, satisfied. He takes a sip of mead. “Then let us hope Odinson returns.”

“He’ll return,” Loki says, newly anxious. “He has your army, your sorcerers. He has Mjolnir.”

Laufey makes a noncommittal noise that is hardly reassuring.

“You are doubtful?”

Laufey smiles, though it does not reach his eyes. He reaches over to pat Loki’s shoulder. “Thor-king is a mighty warrior, as are the friends in his company. Put such troublesome thoughts from your mind. This day is a happy one, for I have been reunited with my beloved nephew after believing him dead for so long. I wish to celebrate.”

“You can hardly expect me to celebrate knowing Thor has set out to war,” Loki counters angrily. “You are hiding something, Uncle. I can tell.”

Laufey’s mouth presses into a tight line. “I do not wish to cause you undue stress in your present condition.”

“Tell me,” Loki whispers. “Please.”

“The Casket has the power to destroy Mjolnir.” Farbauti pipes up. Laufey shoots him a withering glare, which Farbauti meets with a shrug. “He deserves to know.”

“That’s not - that’s not possible. That *can’t* be possible!”

“The Casket of Ancient Winters is an artifact of limitless power,” Laufey says with a mournful sigh. “Helblindi is a formidable sorcerer, this I know. I don’t doubt that he could wield it to such effect. I was a fool not to have foreseen his treachery. Oh, I am cursed, I am cursed….”

Angry tears course down Loki’s cheeks. “So you send Thor to his death? As we sit at banquet? He is our only hope to stop Helblindi!”

Laufey’s eyes flash. “I would see Odinson return. I would have the Casket restored to me, and have you placed on the throne of Asgard, with your child, my kin, as Thor’s heir. But things cannot always be as we hope.” He turns pensive. “It will all be over, come morning. We may as well enjoy what little time we have left.”

Loki seethes. He won’t sit idly by and let Helbindi destroy everything he holds dear.

“You can stay here and await your demise, since that is what you so badly want. I won’t go down without a fight.” Loki rises, turning briefly to Farbauti. “I am sorry for you.”

“Loki -” Laufey calls, almost amusedly, as though Loki were an unreasonable child. “Sit. Eat.”

When it becomes apparent Loki will not heed his order, Laufey gestures to the towering Jotun guards stationed at the entryways to the hall. ”Stop him!”

Guards approach with their shields drawn to block Loki’s path. Loki halts, glaring over his shoulder at his uncle.

“I am sorry, Loki, but I cannot let you leave,” Laufey says.

Loki is having none of it. He is no one’s prisoner, no one’s property or pawn. He throws a smoke bomb and renders himself invisible. In the resulting confusion, Loki manages to dart past the guards’ legs and out into the hallway beyond Laufey’s audience chamber. Behind him, the hall is a-flurry with angry shouts and curses. He faintly makes out Laufey’s voice through the cacophony: *Don’t hurt him.*

A gong reverberates through the palace, making the ice beneath Loki's feet thrum. The alarm bell. That means the palace is on high alert; every Jotun in this place will be on the lookout for him. Laufey will no doubt have his witches and his soldiers congregating at the palace gates so that even the most stealthy disguise will not pass unnoticed. Unfortunately for Laufey, Loki does not intend on passing through any gate.

It has been many years since Loki has lived at Utgard, but from the way he navigates through the labyrinthine passageways, it's like he never left. His feet carry him down echoing naves, dark hallways, and up curving stairwells. Loki pants wildly, cursing himself for not having attended to his exercises since he'd become with child. He muffles his footsteps so no attendant Jotun or guard would hear him pass and be alerted.

He finds the hallways leading up to the bedchambers unguarded. All the guards have likely been summoned to the grounds below, lying in wait for Loki to try to make his escape. Loki sprints down the central hallway, peering around corners as he goes and sneaking past any servants he encounters. At last, he finds the door he'd been looking for. It is locked, but not sturdily so. It easily comes undone with a simple opening spell.

Loki gingerly pushes open the door and audibly inhales. His old room is eerily untouched, his childhood things arranged just as they'd been when he'd last placed them, albeit covered in a fine layer of dust. It's all here: his favourite books, his trinkets. His clothes still hang in the wardrobe. Even the furs on his bed are unruffled and smooth. Loki's throat goes tight. He truly never thought he'd ever see these things again. They remind him of his younger self, who was so innocent to the ways of the world and so unjustly treated. Clearly, no-one had occupied this room since Loki had been exiled. It's...unnerving. Laufey had, after all, believed him dead. Loki refuses to dwell on what this might mean.

The invisibility spell begins to wear on Loki's energy reserves, so Loki shrugs it off. He ought to be safe here for a little while, but even so Loki dares not linger. He makes his way past his bed, towards the dresser by the window. Loki grips the ledge and hefts the dresser away from the wall, until he can slither his body behind it.. He crouches down facing the wall and prays that fortune will be on his side.

Loki presses his palms against the icy surface of the walls. Using his warming touch, Loki slowly melts away at the ice until it is thin enough to be translucent. He exhales sharply in relief when he definitively makes out the hidden cavity - one he'd long ago hollowed into the ice. It hadn't been discovered, even after all this time. Loki breaks through the last of the ice and reaches inside. He pulls out the bundle, folded as neatly as the day he'd last done it. This was, after all, his most prized possession. No one, not even Helblindi, knew he had it.

It smells atrocious, as one would expect of something that had been cached away for fifteen years. Musky, but in decent enough condition. The cold, dry ice had preserved it well. Loki stands and shakes it out, smoothing out the creases reverently with his fingertips. It's smaller than he remembers. Or rather, Loki supposes it's he who has gotten bigger.

Loki wraps the cloak around his shoulders, feather-side out. Yes, it's definitely smaller on his adult frame, to say nothing of the extra weight Loki's recently gained. If he's outgrown it, it might not be able to carry him.

No. Loki refuses to dwell on such thoughts. All he can think is how Thor may die without Loki having a chance to tell him that he loves him back.

Shaking out the cloak, Loki feels the feathers unfurl, as a moth emerging from its chrysalis, whose wings are pumped full of blood for the first time. Loki grips the cloak tightly around himself. Loki opens his window and steps out onto the window ledge, peering down at the precipitous drop to the courtyard far, far below, where Laufey's soldiers are milling about. His heart rate spikes. It had been a long time since he'd last done this.

A guard happens to look up at the tower. He points at Loki. "*There he is!*"

A thousand red eyes turn to stare at him. Loki supposes this is it, then. There is no other way but forward. Loki spreads his wings, takes a deep breath, and jumps.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is definitely the Most™. Like, I usually think that about every new chapter I post but I mean it this time. This is so beyond extra lmao.
>
> Warnings for some violence and gore.
>
> FYI, I went back and edited the older chapters to fix any indiscrepancies and to freshen up the writing (so many ellipses and italics ><). So if you notice changes on future rereads that's why!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1. Steps

Loki's ankle does not heal as expected. After a week the healers suggest surgery. Loki wakes from the anesthesia with screws in his foot, his tendons carefully sewn back into place.

After that, his foot is casted. It itches intolerably, but there isn't much that can be done about it. Thor assigns an attendant to help Loki get around - a servant all his own, Inga. She's a sweet girl, and very attentive, but Loki doesn't like being dependant on anyone, and overall he prefers to use his crutches. Thor helps him about too, with a lot more patience than Loki would usually give him credit for. The awkwardness of Thor's hold lessens each day.

As soon as the cast comes off, Loki rotates his ankle experimentally. He is rewarded with a jolt of pain up his leg. There is an ugly scar bisecting his foot where they'd cut him open. The flesh around the incision is still red and inflamed. He is told, regretfully, that his ankle will likely never be the same.

Under the healer's guidance, Loki slowly is able to put weight on his foot. They do exercises twice daily to maintain flexibility. Slowly but surely, Loki recovers. He walks with a cane on the days when it hurts too much. Other times he can get by unassisted, with just a special boot for support. And some days Loki swears he can feel the screws digging into his very bones.

Loki is alone in the Imperial suite one afternoon with a book open on his lap. To his right is the expanse of floor length mirrors. Unthinkingly, Loki closes the book, rises and approaches them.

Tentatively he tries a few dance steps. Nothing of note - certainly no tumbling. But he does attempt a spin or two, since those he accomplishes with his weight on his right leg. He finds himself hesitant, unwilling to take the risk. His body is afraid of injuring itself again. Loki feels ungainly for the first time ever.

Loki is slowly coming to terms with the fact that his dancing days are effectively over. Dance had been a part of his life for so long that it's hard to imagine himself without it. It was one of the few things he excelled at. It was what made him special. Loki worries that without it, Thor will bore of him.

Loki goes back to his reading and tries not to think about it.

***

A clothier and his assistants come with their wares and set up in one of the sitting rooms of the Imperial Suite. They bring bolts of fabrics: brocades, satins, silks, velvets, and furs, bins of buttons, spools of decorative ribbons and books of fashion plates.

The clothier bows flamboyantly when Loki and Thor enter. He himself is resplendently attired, sporting a shimmering silver vest and a voluminous bouffant hairstyle. He kisses Loki's hand in greeting.

"Truly an honor to meet you, my dear. You are as beautiful as they say. I am pleased to be of service!"

He directs Loki's attention to this or that bolt of fabric, pairing them with complementary trims and buttons for Loki's inspection. Loki runs his fingers over the decadent material. He is overwhelmed by the opulence of the selection. It's been a long time since anyone let him choose what he'd like to wear. Loki is not exactly sure what he's allowed.

Loki's eye is immediately drawn to a rich forest green brocade. The colour reminds him of the deep woods, or of greenery after the rain. It looks expensive. And so....different from the lightweight silks Loki is used to being dressed in. He lingers on it, chewing his lip.

"I like this one," he says quietly to Thor.

The clothier jumps in. "Yes, a fine selection! I knew you would have good taste! We just got this in the other day, as it happens. No one else will have anything like it! Green is very in this year - or it will be, once you're seen wearing it! The colour will bring out your eyes, if I may be so bold as to say so…"

"Whatever you want," Thor tells him.

Loki thumbs his way through the clothier's book of fashion plates. Many of the styles remind him of what Amora and her ilk wear, so he nixes them straight away. Loki likes the look of some of the dresses, but he worries he might come off as too….feminine. Asgardians are very hung up on these sorts of things, for reasons that yet elude Loki. Why they insist on sorting themselves so rigidly by gender, Loki doesn't know. But he also doesn't want to be made fun of any more than necessary. He just wants to be himself.

"We can modify these to have a higher collar, and perhaps a slimmer skirt to accentuate your figure," The clothier says, reading Loki's mind with freakish accuracy. "Yes. That would suit you very well, if I may say so!"

Loki ends up choosing styles which are long - long enough to cover the boot he sometimes needs to wear - and which have elegant, fitted silhouettes. He picks matching trims, lining and buttons too. He is assured by the clothier that the dresses will be more than suitable for someone of Loki's elevated station.

The clothier and his posse return a week later with the unfinished garments for a fitting. Loki tries the green robes first - those being the ones he'd been most anticipating.The dress is heavier than Loki expects, but he likes that about it. The cloth feels substantial and weighty. He's laced up by the clothier's assistants, who dutifully duck their eyes to preserve Loki's modesty. Their professionalism helps put Loki at ease. They are clearly used to dealing with an exacting clientele.

Loki is stunned when sees himself in the mirror. He looks completely different. He feels completely different, too. He looks so...regal. Sophisticated. Like he belongs at Thor's side. Loki loves the way the green shows off the pallor of his skin, and the cut of the dress is impeccably flattering. He can see why this particular clothier is so popular among the ladies and noblemen of the court. The man certainly knows how to deliver.

The clothier delights in Loki's speechlessness and assures him that the alterations will be completed by Thor's nameday. He smoothes out the fabric around Loki's shoulders with relish.

"Yes, we will take it in here and here, and maybe bring the sleeves up a bit. The higher collar is

most striking! You were quite right to make that adjustment. It would complement a long necklace well, would it not? Preferably one of the expensive variety." He winks at Loki, and in his eyes is a knowing gleam. "If I may say so."

***

As soon as the healers allow it, Loki takes to practicing courtly dances in the privacy of the Imperial Suite. Sitting around all day waiting for his ankle to heal had been woefully boring, and it feels good just to get up and move around a bit. The courtly dances are simple, comparatively speaking, and much less aerobic than the dances Loki was trained in. These, at least, Loki can do. They're not especially challenging but the exercise does him good.

He practices with Inga because there isn't really anyone else available. And because she's a servant, it's not like she could lose patience with him or laugh at him. Loki has to teach her the basic steps first before he can dance with her at all. Neither of them know how to lead. Loki tries his hand at leading by reverse-engineering the steps. It's basically like following but backwards. Inga is a good sport. She has an easy smile and is cheerful in nature, and doesn't complain when Loki gets frustrated with himself or when the pain begins to affect his temper. Loki appreciates her good humor, as well as her discretion.

Thor barges in on them while they're locked in each other's embrace. It's unusual for him to come up to the suite in the middle of the day, and he startles them both. Inga gasps and falls to her knees in a familiar servile bow. Loki forces himself not to do the same; he is trying not to revert to their old dynamic.

"What are you doing?" Thor asks, having stopped in his tracks. He's not angry, just curious.

"Practicing."

"Practicing what?"

"A Volta," Loki says determinedly. "I'm learning to lead."

"I see." Thor's eyes crinkle at the ends. "Doesn't it hurt?"

"It's alright," Loki says, though in truth it does, a little.

Thor looks down at Inga, who is quivering on the ground. He rolls his eyes at her and waves his hand. "You can get up, girl."

Inga scrambles to her feet with but otherwise keeps her head down.

"For what purpose?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll lead you one day."

Loki can hear Inga's sharp intake of breath. She's never heard anyone address Thor this way.

But Thor's lips only twitch up in amusement. "I am glad to see you are recovering," he says. "Just take care."

***

When he can stand the isolation no longer, Loki forces himself to take a walk around the palace grounds. It's on a day when his ankle doesn't hurt so bad and he can get by with just his boot and his cane. He makes sure that his hair is tied back the way it's supposed to, and that his knees and shoulders are properly covered. Loki is Consort now. It wouldn't do to parade himself around like the performing slave he'd once been. He certainly couldn't dance for the court the way he used to, even if he were physically able. He's expected to comport himself with more dignity than that.

No one is uncivil, but Loki feels eyes on him everywhere he goes. Lords and ladies immediately stop chattering as Loki draws near. It's obvious they'd just been talking about him. Of course they were. From nameless slave to Consort of the King? It makes for a compelling bit of gossip. They mistrust him because of his magic, because he's foreign, because they think him low-born.

Loki talks to no one. He makes himself as cold and unapproachable as possible. It's the best defense he has. He develops a reputation for being prim, stuck-up. Loki does not mind this so much. Being called an icy little witch is certainly preferable to being called a whore.

The whispers begin to gradually eat away at his resolve. What they think of him shouldn't matter, but it does. Loki's mission is taking a lot longer than he thought. He could be stuck in Asgard for a

long time - perhaps even indefinitely. These people are his cohorts now. Loki cannot avoid them nor their disdainful glances.

If Thor is aware of the rumors and wagging tongues, he does not say so, and Loki does not bring it up either. Loki knows he has no business complaining. Thor did not have to raise Loki up to this station. He could have kept Loki as a harem-slave forever if he wished. Loki asked for this. He does not want Thor to think him ungrateful.

The palace is holding a grand celebration for Thor's nameday, and although Loki would never admit it, deep down he is dreading it. It will mark Loki's first appearance as Thor's Consort at a courtly event - the first at which his new status will be publicly acknowledged. That means Loki will have to face everyone at once and pretend to enjoy himself. His every word and action will be scrutinized to the utmost degree. Loki desperately hopes he won't embarrass himself. There are so many byzantine rules of etiquette at court that he's sure he'll unwittingly commit some faux pas.

The clothier returns with his finished work the day before the festivities. He pulls the green dress out of its decorative case with a flourish and helps lace Loki into it. The garment fits him snugly, and in it Loki stands a little straighter. Loki likes it. He even feels excited to show it off. He hopes Thor will like it too.

Loki spends a lot more time than necessary choosing matching accessories. He ultimately picks his moonstone necklace - his favourite and most well-earned piece - as well as a matching cuff and hair clip. He tries on a fur stole over the dress for a lark. It looks smashing but Loki knows he'd be insufferably hot if he had to wear it for more than five minutes. His ankle feels alright, so Loki decides to forgo on the support-boot in favour of proper doeskin slippers. He could always use his cane if he had to. It would go with his outfit, at least.

The day of, Inga does his hair in neat, elaborate plaits, sweeping it away from his face and into a low bun. She helps him into his robes and Loki dons his chosen accessories. It almost feels like he's putting on a suit of battle armour. From these things, Loki will draw the strength he needs to get him through the night. It's something of a consolation to know that he's wearing a veritable small fortune on his person.

Still, Loki is nervous as he makes his way down to the antechamber of the audience chamber. Thor is already there, waiting to make his grand entrance. Under his arm is tucked his helmet, but otherwise he's in his full imperial regalia. He's laughing at what must be one of Volstagg's stupid bawdy jokes.

Everyone falls silent when Loki steps inside. Heads swivel as Loki cuts through the crowd. Noticing the sudden change in ambience, Thor turns, locking his eyes on Loki at last. His smile melts away.

A sudden, terrifying thought crosses Loki's mind: maybe Thor doesn't like it. Maybe Loki had overstepped his bounds in dressing himself so grandiosely for an event that's ostensibly for Thor. Maybe the gown is too extravagant for one of Loki's station. In fairness, Loki had been given no direction in this regard! He'd been left to his own devices. Loki would have worn whatever Thor told him to, truth be told. Loki doesn't think he could stand the humiliation if Thor ordered him to change.

But as Loki draws nearer, he realizes the expression on Thor's face isn't disapproval. It's more like….awe. Thor looks at him like he's never seen him before. As though Loki were a completely different person. Which, Loki supposes he is.

"You look wonderful," Thor says.

Loki ducks his head and smiles shyly.

"Happy nameday."

***

The party is much like all the others on Asgard: raucous and exorbitant. Not as big as Thor's coronation, but there is little that could compare to that. Wine and mead flow in abundance, and food is heaped on every table. Entertainment is provided throughout the night, including a featured performance by the Dance-Mistress' troupe. It feels so odd not to be down there with the other members of the chorus. Loki keenly remembers what it was like to have this crowd enraptured by his dancing. Verily it was not that long ago.

Loki constantly feels like he's being stared at, but he ignores it as best as he can. Partaking liberally of the wine helps. Loki catches Thor looking at him askance now and again. When he does, Thor smiles broadly at him and kisses his hand, making Loki blush.

Loki is left standing alone as Thor makes his traditional appearance on the balcony to greet the crowds below. He is secretly relieved Thor did not ask that he join him. Addressing the masses of revelers would be too much, too soon; Loki's only been Consort for three months, after all. His position is still rather vague, and Loki is not yet entirely sure what is expected of him. There's never been a slave who's risen as high as he has.

For the time being, Loki is quite content to stay on the sidelines and render himself as inconspicuous as possible.

“Hail, Loki,” Amora says, having come towards him. “I am glad to see you well, at last.”

Loki mumbles a thank you, and hopes that’s the end of it. He can’t help but be intimidated by her. Amora was Thor’s favourite before Loki came to Asgard, and she’s got two children by him. Loki is confident Thor won’t marry her - he surely would’ve done so by now, if he so wished - but she’s still a prominent figure at court. Amora has allies here. Friends. Kin. Loki has no one.

“That’s a beautiful dress,” Amora tells him. “Is it new?”

She knows damn well it’s new. Loki had to set aside all his slave-clothes after he’d been named Consort. She’s making fun of him, trying to make him feel small. And it’s working.

Loki squares his shoulders defensively. “Dagfinnr Designs,” he tells her.

“Of course! I thought I recognized the style. I had him make my handmaids’ dresses years ago. Goodness. I haven’t heard that name in ages. I can’t believe he’s still around!”

Around them, courtiers have gone quiet to watch the interaction.

“His longevity is proof of his skill and workmanship,” Loki fires back. “My lady Amora.”

“Indeed. I’m sure your new wardrobe has come at great expense. You are lucky to be the recipient of His Majesty’s generosity. He is very indulgent of his favorites.”

“His Majesty sees fit to adorn me in a manner befitting my station.”

“It’s just that I have never seen you so….covered.” Amora smiles, shark-like, going in for the kill. “Aren’t you terribly hot? You must miss your pretty little white costumes.” She walks right up to Loki and says, slowly and evenly, “You’ll be back in them, soon enough.”

All around him, people are sniggering. Loki feels hot, all right. He wonders who he's fooling, dressing like this, bearing himself like this. No one, clearly.

Thor sweeps in out of nowhere, cutting through the crowd like a warm knife through butter.

"May I have this dance?" he asks, offering Loki his hand. He keeps his eyes affixed to Loki's, his gaze warm and steady.

Loki just stares. They've never danced together before. Not in public. They've only ever practiced together in the privacy of the Imperial Suite, and only ever just for fun.

Then Loki takes stock of the way Amora's smile has withered, the way the whispers around him have all been silenced. Thor is doing this on purpose.

"Although, you will have to let me lead as I don't know how to follow," Thor adds, so softly that only Loki can hear. He smiles secretively, and in that moment he's so handsome Loki's chest aches.

Loki doesn't have to think twice. He takes Thor's hand.

2. Spark

Loki is both stunned and elated when Thor offers to bring in tutors to train him in the ways of seidr. He must have realized that Loki could use the diversion: a spectacular bit of insight, for him.

Loki assumes that he'd be restricted to the study of healing spells, that being the most benign of magickal arts. Not that he'd complain - he's grateful for any training Thor is willing to grant him. Doing any kind of magickal exercise is better than sitting around idle all day. But, Loki finds himself surprised. Thor sends for mages from across the Realms: mages skilled in illusion magic, transformation magic as well as healing magic.

And so, Loki eagerly takes to training each day. Being in the presence of true masters makes the gaps in Loki's knowledge salient. Though Loki's pride rebels, he aquiesces and lets them guide him through the fundamentals of magic-use. His first project is mastering a basic levitation spell.

‘Basic’ being something of a misnomer, because in fact the spell proves a lot more difficult than Loki expects. Gravity is pesky and it doesn’t like releasing its hold on objects. After a few weeks, Loki can hover rocks the size of oranges for a good few seconds before his magic exhausts. He’s frustrated he isn’t better at this, especially when it seems so simple a task. Loki is impatient to move on to more interesting and complex physics-bending spells, but he knows he can’t until he can at least accomplish this.

And so, Loki lingers a while, long after his tutor takes his leave from the training fields. He levitates the rock a few more times, trying to hold it in the air as long as possible. Loki notices marked improvement from when he first started, but still. It’s such a small rock! It’s embarrassing that this is the best he can do.

Loki shifts his attention to a melon-sized rock nearby and applies himself to trying to levitate that instead. Despite Loki’s intense concentration, all it does is wiggle slightly in the sand. Loki gives up with a huff. He looks around. The training fields are emptying as people peel off to go to attend to their daily affairs. Loki is quite alone now.

Well, there is one spell Loki knows he can do. Loki fires a few energy bolts into the sand, just to know he still can - just to assure himself that he isn’t completely inept. He’s rusty after having gone so long unpracticed, but the spell comes back to him as easily as a familiar dance step. He hadn’t used this kind of seidr since he’d left Jotunheim. He hadn’t dared. The bolts fizzle out in the sand in a wisp of smoke, and Loki smiles.

It’s then that Loki hears voices: Sif and Fandral, who must have just come out to spar. From the intent looks on their faces, Loki knows they’d seen what he had done. They’re both coming towards him now. Loki curses his inattentiveness.

“Were those energy bolts?” Sif asks once she reaches him.

Loki winces. She’d recognized the spell.

“Yes.”

“Does the King know you can do that?”

“No, but -”

“That’s really impressive,” Sif says, and it doesn’t sound condescending. She seems sincere. “Not

a lot of mages can work that kind of magic."

Loki mumbles a thanks. He wishes she hadn't drawn attention to it. Firing them off at all was a mistake.

"Can you destroy that mark?" She points to a target in the distance - a straw bale used for archery practice.

"I - I shouldn't."

"What if we put Volstagg in front of it?" Fandral says.

"What if we put Volstagg in front of what now?" says Volstagg, coming up behind them.

"Loki can work destruction magic," Sif tells him excitedly.

"Not well," Loki interrupts hastily. "I'm not - not trained…"

"It would be so useful to be able to practice with a magic-user! Too often when we encounter them in battle they have the upper hand." Sif's face lights up. "We should ask Thor to find you a tutor in the destructive arts! Then you could spar against us. We could better learn to defend ourselves."

Fandral nods in agreement. "You'd be doing us a favour."

The three of them turn to Loki, and Loki feels his face heat. He hadn't spent a lot of time with Thor's friends, especially without Thor around. Loki does not dislike them, but he doesn't exactly trust them either.

"Thank you my lords. My lady. But I doubt His Majesty would find it proper for me to cultivate such skills..."

"What if we asked him on your behalf? Clearly you have talent. You should nurture it!" Sif playfully punches Loki in the shoulder, knocking him backwards and startling him immensely.

“Wouldn’t you want to learn?”

And the truth is, Loki does. He would be so grateful to be able to do so. It would be so validating to have his full magickal arsenal be acknowledged, and to not be confined to performing little parlour tricks for Thor’s amusement. But at the same time, he’d downplayed his magic so much since Thor first found out about it. He doesn’t want Thor to think he’d lied about it, or that he’d been disingenuous.

The three of them look so encouraging, so earnest. Loki has few friends in Asgard apart from his attendants, who can hardly be called real friends at all. Loki’s heart is tugged, just a bit. It would be nice to see some friendly faces at court.

“I - I suppose,” Loki says. He holds up his hand entreatingly. “But don’t press him too much on it. Please. I don’t want it to become a point of contention.”

Sif’s face is alight with excitement. “Great.”

*****

Loki immediately regrets giving in. Sif couldn't possibly understand why Loki would be reluctant to accept her offer. She hadn’t spent the night in the Underground for lying to the King, as Loki had. She couldn’t appreciate how vulnerable Loki’s position truly is.

Loki intercepts her the next day as she heads down to the training grounds.

“Hail, my lady Sif.”

She looks surprised that Loki would seek her out so early in the morning. They rarely ever speak one-on-one.

“Hail, Consort Loki,” she says.

“I was wondering if you have talked to His Majesty yet. About my magic.”

She shakes her head. “Both he and I have been occupied. But I shall, when the time is opportune.”

“Well, I was thinking on it, and I - I changed my mind. I would prefer if you didn’t.”

Her smile fades. “Why?”

“Because I -” Loki tries to think of a good excuse. Norns, he must sound so suspicious, backtracking like this. She must find him utterly transparent. Loki makes a rash decision: he tells the truth. “Because I told him I could only work healing and illusion spells. He doesn’t know about the energy bolts.”

“You lied to him?”

Oh, if only she knew. Loki has told so many lies to Thor, the nature of his magic being the least of them. Loki is afraid that if one lie were found out, the others would likewise spill, like an unravelling spool...

“Yes, I did. I shouldn’t have, but I did. And I shouldn’t have been practicing that kind of magic, either. I can’t even work it that well - you understand. I won’t do it again. I’m honoured you would want to spar against me, really, but I don’t think it would ultimately be for the best.” Loki takes a breath and adds, “I’m sorry.”

Sif stares at Loki a long while. “You’re afraid of him.”

Loki looks away, suddenly feeling hot. She’s an intelligent woman. Far more perceptive than Loki assumed.

“Loki,” she clasps his shoulder, “I know Thor can be a right arsehole sometimes; I have known him since we were both children. But trust me when I say he cares for you. I have not seen him so happy in many years, and I do believe you’re the reason why. You underestimate his affection for you. I think he would pleased to see your gifts nurtured. But, if this is a secret you wish to keep, then I will not expose you.”

She smiles softly at him, and her dark eyes glimmer. It is easy to see why Thor adores her so.

Loki chews his lip. "You would talk to him for me?"

"If that is your wish."

Loki finds himself swayed by her easy confidence. Sif knows Thor better than anyone, and if she thinks she can convince him…..well, Loki shouldn't dissuade her.

"Yes - alright. Yes. I would be in your debt. My lady."

Sif laughs. "Don't be in my debt, just promise to spar against me. And don't worry about Thor. I can take care of him."

***

Loki is sitting under an orange blossom tree with a book opened over his crossed legs. His eyes skim over the same lines over and over. Ahead of him, some ways away, is the sparring ring where Thor is training with his friends. From the way Sif is talking, gesticulating expressively, Loki thinks she is presenting their case. Loki can't see Thor's face from this vantage point, but Sif is smiling - that must be a good sign. Loki knows how much Thor respects her. If anyone were to intercede on his behalf, Loki is glad it's her.

Loki can see Thor approaching him through his peripheral vision. He refuses to look up until the last minute, when Thor's boots appear in front of him.

"So," Thor says, standing above him, with his arms crossed over his chest. Behind Thor, in the distance, Sif is giving the thumbs-up.

Loki closes his book and lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding.

"So," Loki echoes.

"Destruction magic, huh." Thor's eyes squint at him in the sunlight. His face is stern but there is a

slight teasing lilt in his voice. "I should probably ask when you were planning to tell me about this."

"I wasn't, really," Loki says.

Thor huffs out an exasperated laugh and extends a hand to help Loki to his feet.

"Sif seems adamant. She wants to train against you."

"I would not want to disappoint her…"

"Nor I." Thor points a finger at Loki. "So help me if either of you harm the other."

***

So it is that Loki takes up the destructive arts. A tutor is brought to him, and Loki's skill increases drastically. A few fires are set in the process; Thor tolerates Loki's little accidents admirably. Loki relishes the newfound look of apprehension on his fellow courtiers' faces: Loki is not without claws.

Thor is idly amused as Loki prattles on about his magickal study. Loki's enthusiasm for it is irrepressible. He has always been fascinated by magic, but he's never had as much opportunity to explore his inherent potential as he does now. He is so grateful to Thor for allowing his training, and, practically speaking, for footing the bill. Loki suspects tutors of that calibre don't come cheap. It's better than any other gift Thor's given him. Better than any dress or jewel or trinket. Better even than Loki's horse, whom Loki loves dearly.

"How come I have never seen you use your magic?" Loki asks him breathlessly after one such bout of inane blabbering.

In a smooth motion, Thor grabs Loki's forearms and gives him a little zap.

Loki recoils with a yelp, which then devolves into a airy giggle. It was no more painful than a normal shock; he'd been more surprised than anything else. Thor is grinning at him playfully.

“Now you have.”

“You can do that on command?”

“Sure.” Thor touches Loki’s arm and zaps him again.

“Stop that!” Loki laughs, rubbing his arm. “I get it. I just thought -”

“That I couldn’t summon my own magic? What kind of a storm god do you take me for?” Thor teases. “I can manage it to a point but - beyond that I need Mjolnir. It gets harder and harder to control the more magic I call forth.”

Loki nods. He can understand why - that amount of raw elemental seidr would be quite unstable. While Loki has been learning many different spells and incantations, Thor really only has one magickal expression. But, Thor has more raw power than Loki could ever dream of having. He’s the God of Thunder, after all.

Loki had not given much thought to Mjolnir before, but now his curiosity is piqued. He inspects her during the day while Thor is away at council. She usually sits in the Imperial Suite near Thor’s favourite chair, safe in the knowledge that no-one but Thor could ever take her. She’s an ancient weapon, forged from the heart of a dying star. On impulse, Loki grips her handle. He tries to lift her, but as he expects, she does not budge.

It occurs to Loki that perhaps it might be possible to act as Mjolnir does. She is a channel, a conduit for Thor’s vast reserves of magic. Loki can sense the same sort of magical capabilities within himself. Loki’s magic is very precise - not unlike Mjolnir’s. If he could get Thor to pass him his lightning, maybe Loki could hold it. Maybe he could control it. Loki can see in principle how such a thing could be done. The idea excites Loki. It would be so thrilling to wield that kind of power.

Loki initiates his investigation while he and Thor are in bed one night. Loki is sitting astride Thor, having pinned him down in a bout of playful wrestling which Thor had most certainly lost on purpose. Loki locks Thor’s hands in his.

“Shock me.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

Thor does, but this time Loki’s ready for it. He braces himself by extending out his own seidr protectively, as a fisherman would a net. He isn’t zapped this time. Rather, the electricity is funneled inside him, making its way to Loki’s own magickal reserves. Thor’s magic feels different, foreign, and quite distinct from the magic Loki generates himself. It’s thrilling to be in contact with it. There is something wild and immense about it: a true force of nature.

Loki manages to holds onto it for a few short moments until the lightning escapes in a little blue electric current between his thumb and index finger.

Thor’s eyes go wide. He stares at Loki’s hand.

“How did you do that?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” Loki says, trying to mask his glee. It worked. He can hardly believe it worked!

Thor sits up. He looks at Loki intently.

“Do it again.”

3. Steam

“I want you to know that if you wanted to try anal sex again, I would be amenable.”

Loki times this just as Thor has taken a swig of mead. They’re at private dinner, and their attending servant had just left to fetch dessert. Thor chokes, and spends the next five minutes coughing uproariously until his eyes are red and his cheeks are blotchy.

“You are serious?” Thor manages to croak after he gets ahold of himself. He wipes his mouth and nose off with his napkin. “You want to?”

Loki nods slowly and tries to smile. ‘Want’ is not quite the right word. ‘Ought’ is a more apt way to put it.

“I want to thank you for choosing to continue my Consortship.” Loki says, with a slight clearing of his throat. “And for the magic training. I hope you know that I am grateful for everything you have done for me.”

Thor’s eyes are suddenly dark and excited. Loki can tell he likes this idea, as Loki suspected he would. It helps to remind Loki why he’s doing this.

“Well, this is unexpected,” Thor says, then he frowns. “You are sure, Loki?”

“I know it’ll be different.” Loki assures him, though in truth he doesn’t know how he can be so certain. “Just be gentle.”

Thor leans forward, kisses him, and promises he will.

***

Thor lets Loki set the conditions under which they’ll do it, which makes Loki feel like he has some degree of control of the situation. Thor seems committed to making the experience as pleasant as possible for Loki. Not that it matters; Loki is determined to go through with his offer, no matter how pleasant or unpleasant it might be.

Loki feels he owes Thor this. Things between them had been going well - better than Loki could have ever expected. Thor has kept his word. He’s named Loki Consort, and has bestowed upon Loki the dignity befitting that station. Moreover, to Loki’s knowledge, Thor has not bedded anyone else since the night of his coronation. He’s never even given Loki cause for suspicion. Thor had closed the Imperial Harem less than a year after he’d opened it, surprising everyone. The women residing there were sent back to their country estates, and Amora, indignant, went home to Vanaheim. Loki has slept by Thor’s side ever since. For all intents and purposes, Thor has been faithful.

What Loki promised him in return was complete submission. And to his own credit, Loki reckons he's done an admirable job of keeping Thor satisfied. Thor has a bottomless sexual appetite. He's part fertility god, after all. Loki himself is not unable to keep up, but being the sole outlet for Thor's lust can be quite….exhausting.

Loki expected for Thor to ask for it again. But he hasn't. They have not tried that act since...well. Thor has not pushed it, not even once. He's never sprung it on Loki mid-sex or ordered it from him, even though Loki was prepared to yeild if he did. It makes Loki think that Thor has changed. That he has refrained out of respect for Loki's feelings. And that makes Loki want to give it freely.

The truth is Loki can't think of much else he could give Thor. It's not like he could buy Thor anything. Nor could he dance for him like he once did. All Loki has is his body. And Loki would rather allow Thor this than have him sodomize some other slave in Loki's place.

Loki tries not to think about how painful it had been, nor how humiliated he'd felt. Loki has heard before that it doesn't have to be so bad, if it's done slowly and with lots of slick. Loki is too embarrassed to seek out other pleasure slaves for advice, so he researches it himself in the Imperial Library. He makes sure to be discreet about the books he looks at. No one can know what he's planning. He doesn't need to give his fellow courtiers any more ammunition against him.

He finds what he's looking for in a dark corner of the Library: an elvish book of erotic poems and illustrations. Alfheim is much more liberal in matters of sexuality, Loki knew that already, but he is still somewhat scandalized as he thumbs his way through the book. The illustrations within are so lewd Loki's cheeks heat, even as his body tingles with the perverse thrill of it. There are images of men and women, men and men, women and women, and every manner of grouping thereof. Loki lingers on the pictures of the men together, as that's how Thor will have him. Loki's elvish is rudimental, but he can get the gist of the accompanying text. Men of Alfheim do it for pleasure, he learns, and no one thinks them lesser for it. Even high born men are known to take the passive role. The text relates the story of a king of Alfheim who so enjoyed the passion of his male servants and guards that he would rate their performance publicly.

Loki can't fathom how anyone would find being penetrated like that pleasurable.

Nonetheless, Loki is stubborn. He sets about trying it himself when he's alone in the bath, slipping fingers in his ass and working them in and out. It feels weird more than anything else, but not terribly uncomfortable. Tight. No wonder men like it. But Thor is a lot bigger than his fingers, Loki remembers that much. Loki can't think he'd ever like it.

He hopes that Thor won't degrade him while they fuck. Not call him 'slave' or 'whore' or any other vile slur. Loki will be feeling vulnerable enough already. But, Loki has braced himself for that eventuality. Thor gets wound up when he's aroused, and he sometimes lets himself get carried

away.

He hopes so badly that this time, it will be different. That Thor will be different.

Loki decides that he wants to do it in their bathing chamber. It will be cleaner that way, and it won't matter so much if oil drips everywhere. Loki doesn't want to sully the Imperial bed with their debauchery - figuratively and literally.

"My King," Loki says in greeting. He's reclining on the tiled edge of the bath in what he hopes is an alluring pose. He'd kept his hair loose for this, as he knows Thor likes, and lined his eyes too. He feels wanton, filthy. He'd prepared himself as best he could beforehand, in case Thor proved too impatient. The oil inside him feels strange. He hopes he doesn't look as nervous as he feels. (Loki might've smoked a bit of hashish earlier, just to take the edge off.)

Thor's smile is a familiar one: dark and predatory. He immediately sets about stripping himself of his armor. When he's finally nude, he descends into the steamy water and wades over to where Loki is sitting. Thor kisses him hungrily, running his hands up and down Loki's chest. He's already erect.

Loki is stiff and Thor notices. He pulls back.

"You are sure, Loki?"

Norns, the one time Loki isn't asking for Thor to take his feelings into account!

Loki nods haltingly. "I trust you." He isn't sure if he means it, but he wants to.

Thor's face is searching. Then he then kisses Loki again, and Loki takes comfort in the warmth and familiarity of his mouth.

Loki lays back on the tile and spreads his legs so that Thor is standing between them. He's been in this position many times before, but something about this feels different. Loki almost feels like he's reliving Thor's coronation night, lying splayed on that daybed and waiting for Thor to take him for the first time.

Thor reaches for the bottle of oil that Loki has placed nearby. Just having it there - the insinuation - makes Loki tense. Thor squirts a good amount over his hand, and it drips down his forearms in glistening rivulets. Thor reaches down between Loki's legs and rubs the pads of his slickened fingers over Loki's asshole.

"I did -" Loki stammers, embarrassed. "You don't have to."

Thor seems surprised by this. "I want to." His fingers move in small circles over the furled muscle, as if to help relax it a bit. Oil gets everywhere, from Loki's cunt down his perineum, and further down his crack, making Loki feel wet and messy, though he supposes this is probably for the best.

With Loki sufficiently slickened, Thor slips a finger part of the way in. It feels much the same as when Loki did it. Odd, but not painful. Thor is already panting heavily. He is so, so excited by this, Loki can tell. He's probably been looking forward to this since the moment Loki offered it. And yet, despite everything, Loki is pleased to be pleasing him. He likes knowing Thor desires him still.

Thor works him open with one finger, then two. He's surprisingly gentle, given the circumstances. It makes Loki want to ask if he's done this before...and who with. Then again, maybe he doesn't want to know.

"How's that?" Thor asks. That he's asking at all is funny to Loki.

"Good, fine," Loki answers shakily.

"Can I add another?"

"Yes."

Thor does, slipping it in alongside the other two and working Loki open. The third finger is a bit of a stretch, and it's starting to feel uncomfortable. Loki appreciates the care in which Thor is preparing him, but he is antsy to get on with the proceedings.

"I want you to do it."

Thor looks up at him. “You’re ready?”

Loki wets his dry lips with his tongue and nods in the affirmative. No time like the present, as it were.

Thor pulls his fingers out and reaches for the oil bottle, this time squirting a liberal amount over his cock. He jerks himself a few times to coat it completely, all the while staring at Loki with darkened, hungry eyes. His erection seems so threatening like this. It makes Loki want to close his legs and call the whole thing off.

“Don’t go fast,” Loki blurts out when Thor takes his cock and lines it up at Loki’s hole. He can usually take a hard fucking, but in the ass, he’s not so sure.

Thor nods and presses the head of his cock definitively against Loki’s hole, not yet applying enough pressure to penetrate. Loki tenses again, his body instinctively fighting the strangeness of something going in. Loki takes a deep breath and forces himself to unclench, though he doesn’t lessen his deathgrip on Thor’s biceps. Thor applies a bit more force and pushes through the ring of muscle, slowly sheathing himself inside Loki’s ass. Loki makes a strangled noise. Gods, he’s big.

Thor curses. His voice is like gravel. “So tight, Loki.”

Loki squeezes his eyes shut. It hurts, but he doesn’t want to ask Thor to pull out when this had been his own idea. He wanted to do this for Thor, and he’s determined to go through with it.

Thor holds himself there, panting raggedly and giving Loki time for his body to adjust. It must be taking all his willpower not to start fucking rough, the way Loki knows he loves to do. Loki is grateful for his restraint.

Thor runs his hands down Loki’s thigh. “Relax,” he says, which is an easy thing for him to say. He’s a freeman, he’d never submit to this. But then Thor curls over to kiss him again, his hands splayed reverently over Loki’s body. And it helps put Loki at ease. It feels more bearable.

“Alright,” wheezes Loki. “You can - you can move.”

Thor does, pulling out and then back in. The steady drag of his cock in his ass feels so unnatural, but the slipperiness of the oil helps. Thor grips Loki under his knees and folds his legs up beside his chest, effectively putting Loki on display. It must be quite the view, because Thor’s eyes are

fixed to the place they are joined. Loki turns his head away, feeling self-conscious. This feels so weird and oddly intimate. But Thor is being gentle, and Loki is becoming less and less afraid that he'll lose patience and hurt him. Loki relaxes a bit, and finds that the more he relaxes, the less painful it is.

"Does it feel good?"

Loki can't say that it does, but it doesn't hurt quite so bad anymore. More like a dull ache.

"It's just - you're rather big."

Thor is mollified by this. He grabs Loki's cock.

Loki's hands fly to Thor's. "Don't."

"Why not?"

"I just need to get used to it first," Loki stammers. He's not looking to experiment, he just wants Thor to finish. "Maybe - maybe next time."

Thor likes the sound of that - next time. He releases Loki's cock and goes back to fucking the way they were before. He's still going agonizingly slow. Loki appreciates it, but he knows it'll be over with sooner if he lets Thor go harder. And besides, Loki wants Thor to enjoy himself. That's why he's doing this, isn't it?

"You can go a bit faster," Loki encourages breathily.

Thor's eyes are black with lust. "Can I take you from behind?"

"Yes," says Loki after a beat, and Thor pulls out, making Loki feel odd and open. Loki flips over and kneels down on the inside step of the pool. He curls his body down over the edge and presses his forehead against the cool tile. Turning over means at least Loki can hide his face, and he doesn't have to worry about Thor seeing him wince.

Thor sinks in easier this time, but it still punches the air out of Loki's lungs. Thor starts to move again, fucking in and out with long deep strokes. There's a sharp pain when Thor thrusts in too roughly, and overall Loki can't say he enjoys the uncomfortable fullness, but it isn't unbearable. There is something to be said for the illicit thrill of it. And there is pleasure to be found in the way Thor's hands caress his back, his hair; the way he moans Loki's name in reverence. Loki can do this. He can give Thor this.

The sex is making Loki dizzy. The hashish he'd smoked earlier is in full effect, and Loki feels loose, easy. When Thor fucks in at just the right speed, and at just the right angle, something deep inside Loki tingles pleasantly.

Loki is overcome with a strange feeling: of belonging to Thor, utterly, in the most literal sense. This act is reserved for slaves after all, which is what Loki is. But for once, that fact doesn't make Loki feel bitter. Thor may be his owner, but he is also Loki's protector and champion. Thor would not hurt him, and so to submit in this way is not so bad. With Thor as his master, Loki won't ever have to be alone. He knows that he will be taken care of. Treasured. That his obedience will be met with love.

Thor comes inside him like a benediction, with his hands gripping Loki's hips and his breath hot on the back of his neck. The validation is exactly what Loki needs. Loki smiles dreamily to himself. He is Thor's favourite. He will always be Thor's favourite.

4. Snare

Helblindi, now the resident Jotun ambassador, observes Loki practice his magic from the outskirts of the training ring. His gaze is like a brand on Loki's skin. It's hard to focus knowing he's watching. Loki hopes at least Helblindi sees how much he's improving, especially in the destructive arts.

Helblindi is still there when Loki's training is over, and Loki has no choice but to walk past him on his way out. He hopes today is a day where Helblindi just nods and lets him by without comment. He is not so lucky.

"You grow powerful, little one," Helblindi tells him. "Your master must be very proud."

“Thank you, Ambassador. I hope so.” Loki says with finality - an attempt to end the interaction as quickly as possible. He moves to pass Helblindi, but Helblindi stops him.

“Shall we take a turn around the grounds?” Helblindi’s tone is congenial, but there’s a hard glint in his eye, and Loki knows better than to refuse.

Side by side, they walk through the colonnades of Asgard’s magnificent palace. They rarely speak, but when they do, it’s in that highly clipped, cordial manner of courtly conversation. Or, it’s Helblindi projecting his voice into Loki’s mind, trying to press Loki forwards with his mission. Loki tries to avoid Helblindi as best he can without seeming too obvious about it. Loki is quickly tiring of being reminded of his purpose here. But, though Loki is loathe to admit it, there is a large part of him that is still afraid of Helblindi. Loki doesn’t want to do anything that would antagonize him. His brother can be quite….unpredictable.

They stop on the balcony overlooking the palace gardens. It is a warm day, and the air is sweet-smelling with newly budded orange blossoms. Courtiers mill about, but none mosey too close to the two Jotuns. Loki blends in well enough with his bleached skin, but Helblindi, tall and blue, does not.

“How are you enjoying life in Asgard?” Helblindi asks.

“Very well, thank you,” Loki answers blandly. “It’s beautiful here.”

“Rather hot for my tastes, but I must admit, the gardens are so lush and vibrant at this time of year. See how the flowers bloom.”

He waves his giant hand, directing Loki’s attention down below, and Loki sees what Helblindi has brought him here to witness. Thor is there amidst the blossoming trees, quite conspicuous with his bold red cape. And he’s not alone. Some courtiers flock around him, as well as three young women Loki doesn’t recognize. They are beautiful. Loki frowns inwardly. Thor should be at council this time of day….

“Jarl Haraldr and his daughters,” Helblindi explains.

Thor says something and the girls laugh coyly amongst themselves. Thor is very handsome, and quite charming when he wants to be. Loki has no doubt he has them enchanted.

“The king enjoys their attention,” Helblindi says, and Loki knows it’s true. Thor loves being adored, especially by pretty young things. Loki knows this because he’s fawned over Thor in the same manner. Thor soaked it up then, just as he’s soaking it up now.

“This won’t stop,” Helblindi whispers. “They will keep coming. Virgins younger than you. High born ladies. Princesses. Thor loves women, Loki. It is only a matter of time before he selects one to be his wife. You are not like them, and never can be. You do not fit in here. You grow too attached to this place, to these people. You are entrenching yourself too deep. You are making it too hard for yourself to do your duty.”

Loki watches this scene blearily.

“Do not forget your reason for being here,” Helblindi says, then leaves Loki be.

***

As much as Loki hates to admit it, Helblindi is right. Who is Loki fooling? Thor is the most eligible bachelor in all the Realms. He is shopping for a wife. For a Queen. The fact that Thor’s got some slave-consort is not enough to put a damper on prospective marital negotiations. Loki’s presence in Thor’s life is but a tangential consideration.

Loki is mad about it, even though he knows he has no right to be. He has no claim on Thor. Thor is free to do as he likes, fuck whom he likes. How could Loki let himself be…..be romanced? Loki feels stupid, and angry with himself. Underneath all the expensive finery, he’s still just a slave.

“How was Council today?” Loki asks coolly that night.

“Oh, the usual,” says Thor with a beleaguered sigh. He takes a sip of his drink and reclines further into his armchair. “Tax reform, trade negotiations and the like.”

Loki grits his jaw. He knows what Thor had really been up to. Schmoozing young women out in the garden. It’s crushing to think of Thor replacing him. Loki envisions Thor gradually losing interest in him, day by day, until at last Loki is packed off to another room in the Imperial Suite. Or worse, back to the harem, as someone else basks in Thor’s favour and sleeps in Thor’s bed. Loki doesn’t think he could stand it.

Well, Loki has one thing the high born ladies of Asgard do not: a complete and utter lack of shame.

This is the thought that crosses Loki's mind as he promptly rises, takes Thor's glass out of his hand and sets it on a nearby side table, then seats himself astride Thor's lap. He wraps his arms around Thor's head and places a slow, sensual, lavish tongue-kiss upon his lips. Thor receives him with a surprised hum, and happily opens his mouth to deepen the kiss. He tastes sharp, like the cognac he'd just been drinking. Loki grinds himself down on Thor's crotch, and is pleased to note that Thor is already starting to harden with the promise of imminent sex. It never takes much to ignite his lust. Loki smiles against Thor's mouth. If there's one thing Loki's good at, it's getting Thor to fuck him.

There's a game Loki sometimes likes to play when he and Thor are so amorously entwined. It's called, 'how much can Thor be revved up before he snaps'. Thor enjoys a bit of restraint now and then. He's not accustomed to being bossed around, and he seems to like it in small doses. Or, he likes when Loki does it - when it's obvious Loki will ultimately give him what he wants.

Loki is playing this game now. Call it a bit of payback for the incident out in the garden.

Loki takes Thor's hands and set them firmly on the armrests, squeezing gently to let Thor know not to move them.

"I miss you during the day," Loki tells him.

Thor smiles lazily. "Do you."

"I was thinking about you." Loki rolls his hips a little more firmly down onto Thor's cock, making him groan. "About this."

Loki gets up and flips himself around so he is seated back-to-chest in Thor's lap. He resumes his ministrations, rolling his hips in slow, sensual circles. It helps that he's in his slim-fitting leggings and riding tunic. If he were in his courtly dress this would be much more cumbersome.

Loki turns around again and is pleased by the telltale flush on Thor's face. He can tell Thor desperately wants to touch, but he's behaving himself like a good boy and keeping his hands to himself. Loki parts Thor's thighs so that he's standing between them.

“Do you think about me?” Loki asks, his teasing lilt giving way, just barely, to the accusation underneath.

“All the time,” Thor answers. He is almost childlike in his earnestness. He means it. Thor is a lot of things, but a liar is not one of them. It’s Loki who is the deceiver, who spins lie after lie into his convoluted web and then goes around expecting everyone else to be doing the same.

Loki sighs, taking Thor’s hand. He’d meant to torment Thor more than this, but he has suddenly lost the will to do so. “C’mere.”

Loki leads Thor to the fireside, in front of which is spread a rug of the silkiest, thickest fur. Loki lies down and opens his legs in invitation. Thor needs no further prompting and immediately settles between Loki’s legs. He fuses his mouth to Loki’s and ruts his hips impatiently, making Loki buzz with pleasure. It gets even better when Loki’s leggings are pulled off and he feels the fur against his bare skin.

Loki rolls over onto his stomach and cradles his head in his arms. His eyes flutter shut as Thor enters him from behind. Thor’s attention feels good, as does the thick cock in his cunt, as does the sublime caress of the fur against his own cock as he’s rocked back and forth by Thor’s powerful thrusts. Loki gives himself over to sensuality. Life is so much more enjoyable when he doesn’t think so much.

That’s when Loki feels Thor’s slick thumb at his arsehole. Not pressing in, but just resting, waiting for permission. Loki exhales, feeling his own arousal flag somewhat. Well, he’d put that back on the table, so why not?

“You can,” Loki tells Thor.

Thor slips it inside. It doesn’t hurt - Thor’s thumb is wet, and not terribly thick. It still feels odd to Loki, but not unpleasant. Loki can’t say he likes it. Thor resumes fucking and Loki is able to ignore its presence.

“I want to try…” Thor begins.

Loki’s shoulders immediately tense. He wasn’t looking to ‘try’ anything, what they were doing already was just fine!

Thor pulls out. He shuffles down Loki's body and curls over, parting Loki's cheeks with his thumbs.

Loki warily looks over his shoulder. "What are you -"

Thor shoots him a queer little smile, and without further ado, dips his head and licks a stripe up Loki's perineum. Loki lets out garbled curse. He's never - they've never -

Thor seems amused by his reaction. "Tilt your hips up a bit."

Loki does, helplessly. Thor starts slow, allowing Loki time to get accustomed to the unfamiliar sensation. Then, when Loki's squirming has lessened somewhat, Thor flattens his tongue and established a firm and steady rhythm. He laps at Loki sloppily from his cunt to his ass. His thick tongue probes in the folds of Loki's cunt, tasting the sweetness there, and then ventures upwards towards his hole, licking there too. Loki's head falls forwards. This is so, so, filthy. Perverse. And damn it, it feels amazing.

Thor presses his tongue deeper than before, breaching Loki's hole just barely. Thor's tongue is slippery and wet and fiendish, and Loki's hole opens easily for it. Loki is so, so aroused, having already been wound up by the sex they'd just been having and by the luxurious feeling of the fur against his cock. He's shocked when he realizes that he's going to orgasm. Just like this.

It still comes as a surprise. Loki ruts downwards against the fur and lets out a broken moan as he contracts around Thor's tongue. Thor continues licking at him until Loki's convulsions cease and his body goes boneless.

Loki is dazed. He barely even registers Thor sitting back on his heels between Loki's wantonly splayed legs. Loki has the wherewithal to know Thor hasn't yet come, so he keeps still and waits for Thor to enter him again, as he ordinarily would. But instead, Loki hears the unmistakable sound of Thor jerking himself off. Thor's other hand is gripping Loki's ass to hold him open. Thor aims the head of his cock at Loki's asshole and comes, just inside Loki's entrance but without penetrating him. Loki is too limp from his own orgasm to object, or to even feel shame.

Panting raggedly, Thor gathers the come that has escaped and pushes it inside with his thumb. He's clearly pleased with his handiwork, for having ruined Loki so thoroughly.

“I told you I could make you like it,” he says, cheeky.

Loki fights the urge to kick him in the face.

***

The haze of lust has cleared by morning. Loki is angry with Thor and angry with himself. For being weak. For wanting Thor to want him as badly as he does. Loki’s problems are the same as they ever were! They haven’t gone away just because Loki’s had an (arguably amazing) orgasm. Loki is a fool to believe he can keep Thor’s affection forever through progressively more lewd and degrading acts. Yet he tries, night after night, resulting in some of the best sex Loki’s ever had. Somehow this just complicates things further.

Loki funnels his frustration into his training. In this arena, Loki can at least feel powerful.

“You’re progressing at destruction magic,” Thor comments. “They tell me you hardly set any fires at all this week.”

“Yes, I picture my brother’s head on the target and that improves my aim considerably,” Loki says sourly, and it isn't a lie.

Thor’s brow furrows. “I would that I could find him for you….”

Loki snorts into his wine. Thor is rather obsessed with this brother of Loki’s - where he could be, if he’s even alive. As if Helblindi weren’t in this very palace, under Thor’s roof, enjoying Thor’s hospitality night after night!

It wouldn’t do to have Thor pry too deeply into Loki’s past, so Loki usually deflects Thor’s curiosity to the best of his ability.

Usually.

“If only there were some record of the Vanir lord who gave me as tribute - I cannot recall his name,” Loki crafts the lie carefully, for in fact he remembers cantankerous old Grandl quite well.

“Maybe I could retrace my steps. Maybe he has some information on the slavers who tore me from Jotunheim, who sold me on behalf of my brother. He might even know if my brother were still alive….”

Thor’s face brightens, and with a twinge of guilt, Loki knows he’s taken the bait.

“Now that I think on it, there might be, in the Hall of Records,” Thor suggests. “The archivists there are meticulous record-keepers. I will have them search for information on the subject at once!”

Loki frowns inwardly. “If it please you, I was thinking of looking myself. It would help me….find closure.”

Thor laughs. “You won’t find a damn thing down there on your own! I will instruct an archivist to assist you.”

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When Loki first fell into Thor’s hands, it had been his plan to earn Thor's trust so that Thor would reveal to him the location of the Casket of Ancient Winters. Loki later admits to himself that perhaps this plan had been a little naive. For although their relationship grew be quite intimate, Loki could never bring himself to try extracting this information from Thor. It’s not like Loki could simply ask him outright, or steer the conversation purposefully in that direction. Loki is scared to even try. Thor is not an idiot. He’s not soft like Odin had been. His wits have not been dulled with age. Loki worries that even bringing it up would rouse Thor’s suspicion.

Instead, Loki sets about trying to glean information about the Casket from the sources available to him. Loki’s first night in Asgard had been spent scouring the private office of the Imperial Suite, to no avail. Loki’s later research in the Imperial Library proved likewise unsuccessful. But, Loki is determined. The Casket of Ancient Winters is an artifact of grave importance. It was won in the Great War, and like any other spoil, its acquisition must have been recorded. Surely, then, there must also be a record of where it is currently being kept. Loki has a inkling that the Casket is being held off-Realm in a secret vault. Odin had whispered something about a moon before he’d fallen into sleep - a hidden moon-base, perhaps? - but there are as many moons in the universe as there are grains of sand on a beach. It could be anywhere.

There is only one place where Loki could be sure to find the information he seeks.

“Consort Loki, welcome, welcome!” the archivist says, grinning toothily as she meets Loki in the foyer just outside the Hall of Record’s great doors. Around them are small mahogany cubicles in which the other archivists are busy studying and researching. She is younger than Loki expects. Her long mousy brown hair hangs limply to her waist, and she wears spectacles so thick her eyes are magnified. There’s a thick, drab looking shawl wrapped around her shoulders. “His Majesty told us to expect you.”

“Yes, thank you. I’m uh. Here to seek out information about my origins. About how I came to be in Asgard. It’s personal, you understand.”

She nods excitedly. “Well you have come to the right place! I’m sure we will be able to help you. It would be a pleasure, truly. When did you arrive in Asgard?”

“Um, three years or so ago, during the summer. I don’t recall the exact date. I was given as…” Loki wrinkles his nose. “A gift. To the Allfather.”

To her credit, she doesn’t even bat an eye. “Well, we should very well have a record of that. Come along, right this way.”

Loki follows her through what he can tell are the magic wards protecting this place. The Hall of Records is not open to visitors as the Imperial Library is, and for good reason: it is the depository for all of Asgard’s most classified documents. Loki would have had no chance of slipping in undetected. To even try would out him as a spy at once. Loki could not risk such a foolhardy thing. The only way in, therefore, is to be invited….

Loki is led through the great double doors and audibly inhales.

This place is…..unfathomable. Shelves upon shelves of old books, stretching interminably far in the distance and up to the ceiling. The aisles are much narrower and plainer than the Imperial Library’s - this place is built more for practicality than for aesthetics. It smells like dust and old paper.

The archivist grins at Loki's stupefaction and makes her way inside. “Impressive, isn’t it?”

“Indeed.” Loki swallows tightly as he follows her. Impressive is certainly a word one could use for it. Overwhelming is another.

“These archives are the most complete and thorough in the Realms, stretching backs tens of thousands of years. We house every kind of record - every record worth committing to paper that is! Taxes, censuses, contracts, accounts, genealogies….”

“Tribute, I imagine.”

Of Loki’s sudden bitter tone, she is oblivious. “Oh yes, tribute too. Very important, that. A significant stream of revenue for the Crown.”

She titters on in this vein as they walk. Loki gets the sense that she doesn’t get to talk to people often, and is keen to make the most of it.

“Down this way,” She gestures to a stairwell.

“There’s more than one floor?”

The archivist giggles. “There are nine.”

They descend the stairs and emerge into yet another infinite chamber, an exact replica of the floor above. Loki’s heart sinks to behold it.

“Alright, well, here we are! The Allfather’s wing. Lessee.” She stops at the head of each bookshelf to read its inscription. “This way, come along.”

She trots down one of the aisles with Loki in tow, periodically pausing to scan the labels on the spines of the books. She stops, suddenly, and cranes her neck upwards. She grabs a nearby ladder and tugs it towards a particular bookshelf. The ladder rolls easily on its rails. She steps on a lever near the bottom rung to lock the ladder in place. It makes a resounding CLANK sound that echoes jarringly through the hall.

She climbs up the ladder and peers over the dusty tomes. “Ah,” she says, and pulls out three massive books, handing each in succession to Loki. “These concern the Allfather’s estate and the property therein, in the time period you specified. You’re probably in one of these somewhere.” She climbs down and motions to a small alcove in the bookshelf with a desk and two chairs. ”Here, we can sit.”

For all his talk, Loki actually does not actually want anyone to investigate his origins. It would be highly undesirable to have envoys show up on old Grandl's doorstep, asking invasive questions about that Jotunn runt he'd once put under Odin's eye. Loki fears that trail would lead inexorably back to Helblindi.

So, once the archivists settles in her chair, Loki waves his hand, surreptitiously casting a sleeping spell over her. She slumps forward, but Loki catches her before she smacks her forehead on the desk. He arranges her so she's curled over the desk with her face pillowed in her arms and her glasses nestled safely on her head. Loki tucks her mealy shawl over her shoulders with care: an apology of sorts. He didn't relish having to do that to her.

Loki looks around. He's made it: the Hall of Records. But, where to start? The immensity of this place is staggering - far beyond what Loki could have ever anticipated. The books here must be organized, but not by a coding system Loki recognizes. The numerals on the bindings are meaningless to him. Loki surmises that if there were any information about the Casket to be found here, it wouldn't be in these more recent volumes, as the Great War took place many years before Loki was born.

Loki hasn't much time - too long and another archivist might come looking for them. He is not even sure how long the sleeping spell will hold.

Loki backtracks a bit, as the books he'd passed on his way in looked a little dustier, their leather-bound covers lacking the luster of newness. He pulls out books at random, scanning their contents cursorily to get a general sense of the information therein. It is nothing of interest: Barrels of mead bought. Servant's pay. The cost to replace a broken gargoyle. These are royal household accounts: the mundane, daily expenditures that go hand-in-hand with the running of an estate.

Loki jogs around the corner to the next aisle. He pulls out a book and flips through it, but it is much the same.The next aisle over appears to be devoted to tax documents dated from Odin's reign.

Within about forty minutes of frantic searching, it's clear to Loki that the records concerning the Great War are not to be found in these books, nor in any books nearby. For all Loki knows, he is nowhere near the section he seeks. Asgard's military records might be held on another floor entirely. It would take Loki weeks, maybe months of sifting through this vast archive to find what he's looking for - not that he'd ever have this chance again. He'll never dream up another excuse to be let down here. This was his only shot. It was a valiant attempt, and wickedly clever, but ultimately futile.

Loki pads back to the sleeping archivist, who is snoring softly amidst the books she'd brought down. Curiosity overtakes Loki. Is he truly listed in these records, as she'd said? Loki opens one of the volumes on the desk and thumbs through it.

It's the same kind of dull material. Financial accounts, staffing records. Loki recognizes the name of the estate though - Svingvoll. That's where Odin spent most of his retirement, and also where he'd first brought Loki upon their arrival in Asgard.

Loki flips forwards a few more pages. The word 'Vanaheim' creeps up more and more, and from the date on the upper right hand side of the page, Loki knows the book is now referring to the fated trip in which he was first introduced to Odin.

There are more notes about the trip as Loki reads further, details of travel itineraries and accommodations and scheduled meetings. Then, halfway down the page, something catches his eye -

Slave, Loki. Age: unknown. Gender: ?? Race: Jotun (runt). Rcvd Lord Grandl, Vanaheim. 5000 gold.

5000 gold. Loki stares at the number, unsure of its meaning. The answer comes to him all at once: it's his appraised value, recorded as a part of Odin's estate.

So. Helblindi was wrong when he called Loki worthless. Loki now knows exactly what he's worth. Five thousand gold pieces.

Loki slams the book closed. He lifts what's left of the lingering sleep spell and nudges the archivist on the shoulder. She jerks awake, blinking wildly.

"Oh my. I must've drifted off, I am terribly sorry. How embarrassing!" She looks up at Loki and reorganizes the spectacles on her face. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

Loki forces a thin smile. "I have seen enough."

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That number haunts him. It's not like it's an insubstantial amount; Loki knows he's beautiful, of course he would have been ascribed considerable value. It's that he even has a number at all - like a piece of furniture, or a prized horse.

"Well?" Thor asks that night. "Did you find anything in the Hall of Records?"

Loki cannot contain the acid in his voice. "That I'm worth five thousand gold pieces."

Thor just blinks at him stupidly. Loki sighs. It's not Thor's fault Loki wound up enslaved; Loki has his dear brother to thank for that.

"Apologies. I spoke rashly. I know what I am. And no, I didn't find anything of note. I suppose we will just have to be content with not knowing."

Thor nods uneasily. "As you wish."

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Thor comes to him a few days later with a small chest. He hands it to Loki. Loki just stares at it.

"What's this."

"Ten thousand gold pieces." Thor explains. "It's for you. A gift. I hope you know you're worth far more to me than...than that."

Loki suddenly gets it. Thor thinks Loki found the amount too paltry and had taken insult!

"I see. You think I am worth double."

"Yes! No. I mean - I thought….I don't know what I thought." Thor purses his lips. "You're upset."

“Why would I be upset? This is a lot of money.” Loki opens the chest and runs his fingers over the coins. Dear Thor; it’s almost endearing that he thought this would be a good idea. Loki is simply curious when he asks, “You would pay this much for me?”

“Yes, of course.”

“What about double? Twenty thousand gold pieces?”

Thor looks uncomfortable now. It’s amusing to watch him squirm.

“I would.”

“I can’t dance, I’m half-crippled,” Loki points out. “Surely that affects my value.”

You’re not… not crippled!” Thor sputters. “Don’t disparage yourself like that.”

Loki cocks his head. “What am I worth to you, Thor?”

Thor falls silent. His mouth opens but nothing comes out. He looks lost.

“I couldn’t put a price on you, Loki,” is what he finally says.

Loki smiles. Now Thor understands.

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It may be that Thor will have to take a wife someday, and that that wife won’t be Loki.

It may likewise be that Loki will never find out the location of the Casket. That he will never get the chance to go home or be free.

What Loki should do, is take the money and set it aside. It's not like he needs it for anything; his every material whim is already satisfied. Loki has no use for another horse, or for more clothes or jewels or anything else that could be bought. It wouldn't hurt to have a little contingency fund squirreled away in case Loki should ever need to make a speedy escape. Ten thousand gold pieces is not enough to live on indefinitely, but it's at least something.

What Loki ends up doing, however, is giving his fortune away, piece by piece, to the peasants he and Thor encounter when they go riding. It just kind of happens, the first time - the young girl they'd met looked like she could've used a new dress, or sturdier shoes, or a decent meal. Loki had a few coins in his purse to spare, so why not? The girl was delighted - she'd beamed happily at Loki, addressing him as 'Highness' (wrongly) and curtsying deeply (also wrongly). Loki found himself rather charmed. Loki brings more coins with him the next time, and he ends up passing those out too. It soon becomes something of a habit, and the more Loki does it, the more happiness it brings him. He basks in the way the children smile at him. They love receiving a token from their King's beautiful companion. Loki tells them the coins bring good luck - whether or not this is true is besides the point. Coin by coin, Loki dismantles his fortune. Thor looks on as he does so, smiling fondly all the while.

Loki may never go home, it's true. He may never be free. Thor may never be his, in any meaningful sense. But there is happiness to be found in this life, if Loki would bend to allow it. More and more, he thinks he will.

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Loki is disorientated. He is falling, falling, and only at the last second is he able to pull upwards and gain some wind under his wings. The Jotun guards assembled on the grounds below gawk helplessly as Loki soars up over Utgard's mighty walls and out of their reach.

Swiftly Loki sails over Jotunheim's countryside and then up and over the mountains. Beyond that lies the ocean. The water below is opaque, black, bottomless, its surface broken only by the occasional bobbing iceberg. Loki is tossed hither and thither by the ruthless maritime winds, and twice he loses control and nearly plummets into the water. He rights himself just in time. The thought of crashing into the sea terrifies Loki immensely. There are creatures in the deep….

It's been a long time since Loki had last taken wing. Flight had once been Loki's chief joy, back when he was little more than Helblindi's prisoner. He is incapable of finding any pleasure in returning to it now. There is too much at stake; too much potential for disaster. He's out of practice and his near-accidents leave him spooked. He feels cumbersome. His body is too heavy for the cloak, which is probably why flying with it now is a lot harder than he remembered it to be. He's never flown such a great distance in one go before, and there are many, many miles yet to cover before he catches up to Thor and his war party. Loki only knows in what direction to fly because of what he'd seen in Helblindi's mind during the botched Bridge spell. Loki hopes Helblindi had not altered his plans since then.

At last, Loki spots land in the distance. Having reached the eastern shore, Loki is made aware of a palpable tension in the atmosphere: seidr, drawn forth from the Casket itself. Loki recognizes it immediately, for he'd not long ago held the Casket in his hands, and he knows first-hand how distinct and remarkable its magic is. It confirms that Loki is going in the right direction, but it also means that someone is making use of the Casket's magic.

The closer he flies the more intense the tension gets, until at last, on the far horizon, Loki faintly makes out lightning flickering in the sky. The presence of lightning storms indicates that Thor is still alive. But as Loki draws nearer, he notices that the lightning blasts are scattered, incohesive. Not a unified strike, as they should be.

Closer still, and Loki realizes the situation is much, much worse than that.

Chaos reigns on the battlefield below. Helblindi has grown himself into a giant fifty feet high. His skin is mottled grey and his eyes are jet black. He has been corrupted by the misuse of the Casket's power. Laufey's tallest warriors do not even meet his knees. The Jotuns are disorganized, confused, and lacking in leadership. Helblindi's laugh shakes the earth as he crushes Laufey's soldiers underfoot and blasts them with ice beams.

From above, Loki frantically searches for Thor. He spots a flash of red behind a great boulder and he swoops down towards it. Loki lands ungracefully and casts off his feather cloak.

Thor is stunned as he finally catches sight of Loki rushing towards him.

"Loki?" Thor's eyes are wild and terrified. "What are you doing here?!"

“I’m here to help,” Loki answers simply. He draws closer, but Thor only shoves him away with a snarl.

“You can’t. The battle is lost. You have to get out of here! *Now!"*

“No! I won’t leave you,” Loki shouts back. “Where is Mjolnir?”

“Destroyed.” Thor’s voice cracks. His eyes are wet and in them Loki sees panic. “Helblindi crushed her. He crushed her…. He’s too powerful. We are too late. I can’t fell him without her.”

“Thor, listen to me.” Loki grips his forearms. “You must bring down your lightning unto me. Your full stormcall.”

Thor shakes his head. “No.”

“You are wasting your magic like this! You can’t harness your lightning without Mjolnir. But I can. You must pass it to me - as much seidr as you can draw forth.”

“I can’t,” Thor says weakly. “I’ll kill you.”

Loki knows all too well how true this is. In all their little practices, Thor’s never passed Loki his entire stormcall - not even close. Loki is no master sorcerer. He can’t even fathom what catching all that seidr would be like. What it would *take.* Loki refuses to convey anything but absolute confidence to Thor.

“It is our only chance to stop him now. You and I are the only beings that stand in his way.”

Thor looks uncertain, frightened. Loki has never seen him like that, and it frightens him in return.

“He will kill me anyways.” Loki says softly. “And if he doesn’t….I won’t go back to him, Thor. Give me the chance to avenge myself. Give me the chance to fight back.”

Thor glances around the battlefield, to where Laufey's soldiers are being ravaged under Helblindi's might. They have lost. Helblindi is all but unstoppable.

"Yes - Alright. Yes. But please - please tell me you're ready."

"I'm ready," Loki assures him, though the words sound hollow even to his own ears. "You cannot hold back, do you promise?"

Thor nods faintly.

"Promise me Thor!"

"I promise."

Loki takes a deep fortifying breath. He is exhausted from his flight, but he cannot let Thor know that. He peers past the boulder. Helblindi's attention is diverted to shooting down deserters one by one with ice beams emanating from the Casket. It would be wise to strike while he is so occupied, and before Loki has time to stop to think about what he's doing.

Loki tugs at Thor's hand. "We have to get closer."

Thor digs in his heels. "Loki I -" he starts. "I can't believe you came for me."

From the way Thor says it, Loki knows that what Laufey told him was true: Thor loves him. What Loki should say, what Loki came here to say, is *I love you too.* This may well be his last chance to do it. And yet, Loki's tongue is thick in his mouth. There is still so much left unsaid between them. So much history. He wouldn't even know where to begin.

"You fool," is what Loki says instead, giving Thor's hand a little squeeze. And together, they venture into the fray.

Ahead of them is Helblindi, a veritable mountainous giant. Helblindi snaps the neck of one of Laufey's warriors as easily as one would a twig, and throws the limp body insouciantly over his shoulder. He turns, suddenly, and catches sight of the two of them approaching. His monstrous face cracks into a surprised yet delighted grin.

“Ah! Brother! So kind of you to have joined us! I must thank you for enabling me to take possession of this treasure,” Helblindi’s voice sounds like several voices speaking at once. He holds up the Casket, which is minuscule in his giant hand. “You didn’t turn out to be useless after all.”

Loki musters his courage. If he must face Helblindi head-on, then he will make sure Helblindi knows where he stands.

“Helblindi, Betrayer, I have come to put a stop to your madness.”

Helblindi laughs. The sound is deep and rumbling and unnatural. “You have, have you? Come to blast me with a few bolts? I admit I admire your courage. You always were courageous, my brother. Courageous, and yet stupid. I thought for sure your sojourn in Asgard would result in your demise. I had been counting on it…” Helblindi motions to Thor with a twisted smile. “I thought one day your dear master would grow bored and dispose of you, like so many other used-up whores. But, you proved me wrong. He never tired of raping you.”

Loki refuses to be cowed. He has had enough of being humiliated by Helblindi.

“You think so little of me? You have betrayed your kin, the most vile offense there is. You are loyal to no-one, and no-one is loyal to you. You are loved by no-one. You are a marr upon our family name, a *monster,* and on behalf of our ancestors I curse you.“

Helblindi’s smile slowly fades. “You continue to surprise me even now,” he muses. “Oh my wild, reckless brother. Can’t you see, your cause is lost. Your beloved has been made impotent; his mighty Star-Hammer I have destroyed. But you needn’t die. It would be a waste to rob the world of such beauty. If you surrender now I will spare you. You can have the honor of adorning my throne, clad in chains, as an ornament to my victory. I will even let you live long enough to birth your child, if only so that you can watch me tear off its flesh and eat it. But Thor -” Helblindi’s lips curl into a moue, “Thor I am afraid must die.”

“I will never surrender to you,” Loki hisses.

“So be it.” Helblindi’s face twists into a terrifying snarl as he begins to summon forth seidr from the Casket.

Loki yells, “Thor, now!”

Thor is already opening the sky. Electricity is amassing above them in the sickly grey-green clouds, and the static makes Loki’s hair stand on end. It is the most awesome and terrifying thing that Loki has ever beheld. From the way the sky alights, Loki knows that Thor has kept to his promise: he has not held back. This won’t be anything like the little bursts of lightning Thor passed to him when they play-practiced. This is Thor’s full stormcall - the likes of which Thor would only summon out of dire necessity. Loki braces himself and opens his hands to receive it, knowing that this will be the most extreme feat of magic he’s ever attempted - if he survives it at all. His instinct is to run, to cower or shield himself. Loki steels himself instead. If he’s going to die today, let it be written that he fell with dignity. Like a true warrior.

The pause drags on tortuously until finally the lightning breaks, and Thor’s stormcall tears through the sky. It touches down in fragmented lightning bolts all around Loki’s immediate vicinity. The accompanying thunder comes from every direction at once. Loki’s breath is punched out of his lungs by the force of it. His knees buckle. But Loki is not felled. He opens his eyes and is stunned to realize he’s caught it. It’s working.

….Just barely. His net of seidr is at capacity, pushed to its limits by the sudden onslaught of raw elemental magic. This is by far the most lightning he’s ever handled. It takes all of Loki’s concentration just to keep his own magic from collapsing. He cannot let even a flicker of the electricity escape, lest his own attack be diminished. They only have one shot at this.

Loki aggregates the lightning to his core and holds it tightly. The magic is unstable, wild. Devastating. It thrums inside him, pent up and needing release. It’s a power the likes of which Loki has never felt before - like holding an entire storm within his chest.

A strange feeling overcomes Loki suddenly. He feels like….like he’s done this before. Everything seems so familiar, like a long forgotten memory or a lingering dream. But no - that can’t be right. Loki has never been on a battlefield before. He’s never used his magic in a warlike capacity.

No - Loki had *foreseen* it. This very scene came to him in a vision years ago: of he and Thor doing battle side by side, equals in strength and magickal endowment. It hadn’t been an idle fantasy. Loki had prophesied it.

And with that, Loki releases. The light coming from his own hands is blinding, like a thousand blazing suns. This is the full might of Thor’s elemental magic, his entire stormcall condensed into one singular beam. It escapes Loki all at once in a violent whoosh.

Loki only knows he'd struck his mark by the earth-shaking roar Helblindi emits. Otherwise, Loki is rendered insensate. He blacks out as he's thrown backwards by the resulting explosion. He lands with a dull thud, and is winded by the impact. Ice and earth and debris are flying everywhere. Loki covers his head with his arms protectively and squeezes his eyes closed. He stays curled in a tight ball for a long while as he waits for the fallout to settle.

When it finally goes quiet, Loki peeks out from behind his arms. He blinks away the spots in his eyes several times, as if that would dispel the sight in front of him. He can't believe what he's seeing. Where Helblindi had been, there is now a vast smouldering crater. Loki had vaporized him.

He's done it. He can't believe he's done it.

Dazedly, his ears ringing, Loki stumbles to his feet. Surrounding him is the desolation of battle. Corpses of Jotun and their boar-steeds litter the field. The earth is scarred from Helblindi's blasts and from the crater made from Loki's own attack. The wind howls around him. Thick in the air is the coppery smell of electricity. For all the chaos of mere moments ago, it is now eerily silent; the only sound is the still-sizzling earth inside the crater.

In a nearby snowbank Loki spots a dim blue light - the Casket, which had blasted out of Helblindi's hands. Loki wobbles towards it and digs it out of the snow. The Casket is utterly depleted, its magic sucked dry by Helblindi's misuse. Its light is feeble, but not extinguished. Loki tucks it into his satchel. It will be awhile before the Casket's magic replenishes, but it is intact, and that is what matters most.

"Loki!"

Thor is rushing towards him from across the devastated field. He's dishevelled, and bears more than a few cuts and bruises. He's limping, but he is alive.

Loki runs up to meet him. They embrace and Loki lets out a shaky sob. He is so relieved, so relieved. The ordeal is over.

"You did it! You destroyed Helblindi! Oh, Loki, I am so proud of you. Are you alright?"

"I'm alright," Loki assures him, then lets out an absurd little giggle. He's positively giddy, still high on adrenaline. He can't believe it's over. He can't believe he took on Thor's entire stormcall….and *channeled* it. Helblindi is gone. He will no longer haunt Loki like a shadow. Their

secret will no longer hang over Loki's head like an executioner's blade. Loki is free.

Loki clings tightly to Thor's chest, burrowing himself there and wanting nothing more than to stay in his arms forever. They hold each other for a long while as they catch their breaths.

At length, Thor pulls back. "Where is the Casket?"

Loki gestures to his satchel. "I have it."

"In there?" Thor's eyes dart down. "Can I see it? Give it to me."

The way he says it seems off, somehow. It gives Loki pause.

"Why?"

"So we can use it to rule the Realms together," Thor says, like it's the most obvious thing in the world. He cups Loki's face. "King and Queen. Side by side. All-powerful. Unchallenged."

"I thought you said…" Loki's voice trails off. He peers over to the smouldering crater, the place where he'd struck Helblindi down - now empty. Loki looks at Thor with new eyes. Really looks at him. A sinking feeling settles in his stomach.

"Don't you want that?" Thor says. His voice is strange. "Give it to me, my love."

"No," says Loki, backing up.

Thor laughs a bit. He opens his arms. "This is a happy moment! The Betrayer has been defeated! You have saved us all. You are the Hero of All Nine Realms."

"Stay back," Loki holds up his hand. "Don't come any closer!"

Thor does stop. His brow furrows. “Are you angry with me?”

“I….” Loki pauses. He swallows tightly. “I thought *you* were angry with *me*.”

Thor’s expression is poignant. “No, Loki. No. I love you. I always have. Nothing could ever change that, not even the truth of your secret. Don’t you see, now that I know who you really are, we can be together. We can be a family.”

Hearing it from Thor’s lips is like a knife twisting in Loki’s heart.

“You want to marry me?”

“Of course,” says Thor, as if surprised Loki would even have to ask. “More than anything.”

“And have me rule with you at your side?”

Thor nods eagerly. “Like the sorcerer-queens of old. A worthy successor to my mother.”

“With the Casket’s power mine to command?”

“Yes, my love,” breathes Thor. “Whatever you desire.”

Loki’s voice is a low whisper. “That’s not what you told Laufey.”

Thor’s smile fades. They stare at each other in silence. Then, abruptly, Thor charges, barrelling towards Loki, his cape flaring behind him. Loki panics and summons forth the very last dregs of his magic. He lets fly an energy bolt and blasts Thor in the chest just before Thor reaches him. The force of it flings Thor backwards into the snow.

Loki grabs a spear from a nearby dead soldier and scrambles over to where Thor is lying. Loki stands above him, his spear brandished at Thor’s jugular. Thor peers up at him through hurt, wet eyes as he clutches his chest in agony. His armour has a great gaping hole where Loki had struck him.

“Why?” he gasps. “Why are you doing this?”

Loki bares his teeth with a feral hiss. “You *know* why.”

“Loki, please,” Thor pleads. “I love you.”

“Stop saying that!” Loki screams. “Stop lying to me! Cast it off.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about-”

“All you have ever done is lie to me. Use me. Deceive me. Die honorably, you traitor! Cast it off!”

“Loki...Don’t.” Thor whimpers. “Please.”

Thor writhes in pain, his handsome features contorted into a grimace. Loki hesitates. He can’t - he can’t do it. Loki lowers the spear, just a little.

Sentiment.

...and Thor surges upwards, grabbing hold of the handle. Thor is strong, but he’d been weakened by the blast, and Loki has the upper hand. After a struggle, Loki wrests control of the spear. He does not hesitate this time. He throws his body weight behind it and forces the blade through Thor’s heart.

Thor falls backwards once again, this time skewed into the ground. His eyes are wide, almost surprised when he looks down at the spear that’s been driven through his chest. He wheezes and gurgles as frothy blood starts seeping from his mouth. Beneath him the snow stains red. Horrible and pathetic are the sounds he makes in his struggle to draw breath. He coughs, sputtering up yet more blood and choking on it. He fixes his eyes on Loki’s, quietly pleading, afraid - and Loki does nothing. Loki cannot bring himself to move. He cannot even look away.

Eventually, Thor’s gasps start to taper off. His body convulses once, twice, then goes limp. His

head falls back into the snow. The spark of life fades from his eyes. The irregular puffs of condensed breath at his mouth cease.

Loki watches Thor's unmoving body for a few moments. Waiting. Waiting for - something. Something to happen. Anything.

"....Thor?" Loki's voice is very, very quiet. He kneels down beside him and gives him a little shake. "Thor?"

Still nothing. Thor is lying very still, his body quickly becoming cold to the touch.

Loki sits back on his heels and covers his mouth with his hands. In mounting horror, Loki realizes he may have just made the gravest mistake of all.

...Then the glamour fizzles away, revealing Helblindi's corpse.

Loki's scream is blood-curdling, bone-chilling, replete with all the rage, all the hatred, all the sorrow he's ever felt. Loki screams until his voice is raw. He screams for his younger self, for all the suffering he's endured, for the humiliation, and for this ultimate most cruel deception.

Loki kicks Helblindi's body. "Damn you! Curse you!"

Loki prys an axe from the grasp of a nearby dead warrior. It is so heavy Loki can hardly wield it, but his anger fuels him and gives him strength. Loki will make sure Helblindi suffers in the afterlife. Loki will claim Helblindi's head, and the soul trapped within it, so that Helblindi's spirit will never be released to the Hall of their Ancestors through the cleansing flame of cremation. Loki takes aim, hefts the axe high above his head, and slams it down upon Helblindi's neck.

Blood starts gushing out of the wound, the sheer volume of which makes Loki's stomach lurch. Helblindi's head is now hanging half-severed from his body. Loki hadn't made it past the spinal column, not even close. Loki wretches at the sight. But, he is committed to finishing his gruesome task. He dislodges the axe, takes a deep breath, and tries again. It takes several swings to hack through the bone. Hitting the mark at all proves difficult. Loki's aim is less than ideal - he's never swung an axe in his life, let alone for this purpose. He's never done anything like this at all. Loki has never fought any battles. He's never been subjected to the grim reality of war. This task does not feel glorious, the way a victory should. The righteous anger he'd felt mere moments ago has dissipated. Loki is repulsed.

Loki becomes so desperate to get the deed done that he uses a knife to sever the last of the tendons in Helblindi's neck. Loki carves the flesh away crudely in his haste. Blood gets everywhere - on his clothes, his face, hands and forearms.

At last, Helblindi's head falls away from his body, his tongue lolling in his mouth and his eyes rolling back into his head. Loki recoils. Even though it's his trophy to claim, Loki does not want to touch it. Swallowing down his disgust, Loki picks it up by one horn and wraps it in a sack, which quickly soaks through with blood and starts to freeze. At least now it can't….look at him.

"*Thor*!" Loki yells. He gets up and scours the battlefield. Scores of dead Jotun litter the plain, their corpses quickly gathering a fine dusting of snow. Although their sacrifice ultimately was not in vain, Loki can't help but feel guilty. Helblindi's madness may have been all his own, but it was Loki who provided him the means of acquiring the Casket.

Vultures begin to circle overhead, attracted by the smell of blood. Scavengers will certainly follow. Loki knows he has little time.

"Thor!" Loki shouts again.

From across the field, Loki catches sight of a telltale red mound in the snow. Loki dashes to the fallen figure and drops to his knees, setting the sack aside. He rolls the real Thor onto his back.

"No. No, no."

Thor's lips are blue with hypothermia. His skin is a horrid shade of purple-grey, and his armour is entirely frosted over. Thor had been blasted with the full force of the Casket of Ancient Winters. Helblindi must have struck him mere milliseconds after Thor had brought his stormcall down unto Loki. Passing his lighting had rendered him completely vulnerable to Helblindi's attack. It's a miracle he's even alive at all.

Thor makes a deep plaintive sound. Loki isn't even sure Thor recognizes that he's there.

Loki whips his head around desperately. "Help! Someone help, please!"

There is no response save for the howling wind. All their allies are either dead, wounded or have deserted. The boar-mounts have scattered, no doubt spooked by Thor's lightning.

Loki had no magic left with which to soothe him; he cannot even draw forth enough seidr to sustain the faintest warming touch. Loki's magic reserves are as depleted as the Casket's. And even if they weren't, the kind of healing magic Thor requires is far, far beyond Loki's capabilities. Thor needs expert medical care and shelter urgently. He won't last until morning.

"Stay with me," Loki whispers, cupping Thor's cheek. Thor gazes back at him uncomprehendingly, his eyes glassy and unfocused. "Stay with me. You're alright. You'll be alright."

Loki gets up and jogs around. His scream echos off the dunes of snow, and is shrill and panicked even to his own ears. "Help! Someone help me! The king is wounded!"

There is no sign of Thor's friends or any of Laufey's soldiers. There is no sign of life at all.

Loki is at a loss. He can't fly Thor away with his feather cloak - it was hardly able to carry Loki alone. Nor can he leave Thor behind to get help, for surely Thor will freeze to death in the night. The pull to stay with Thor, his mate, is too strong. Loki doesn't even know exactly where they are, nor even where the nearest source of help would be. In every direction is the perpetual unforgiving expanse of Jotunheim's tundra.

Loki circles around frantically. His throat hurts from screaming, so when next he speaks, it comes out as a whimper:

"Please, someone help me."

There is no one. He is utterly alone.

In his despair, there is quiet. And into the quiet speaks a voice, seemingly coming from everywhere and nowhere, from both outside and from within.

O my child, you are not alone.

“I am,” Loki says aloud, because he’s probably going mad and it’s not like there’s anyone around to hear him anyway. “There is no one. I can’t save him.”

You have already saved him, says the voice warmly. *Neither you nor him were meant to die this day.*

Loki shakes his head. Tears run hot down his cheeks. “I don't even know where I am. I am lost.”

I will light for you the way.

It’s then, as the sun begins to set, that Loki notices a star in the sky brighter than all the rest hovering over the horizon. Loki does not recognize it. It is out of place amidst otherwise familiar constellations. Even its light seems different. Warmer. Almost like it commands a presence. There’s a tug in Loki’s chest that tells him he needs to follow it. That if he did, there might be a chance. Loki can’t explain it. He knows it’s absurd. He must be hallucinating, overcome with exhaustion and stress. But for whatever reason, hope is kindled. Anything is better than staying here, awaiting the inevitable.

A strange calm settles over Loki. All at once he knows what he must do.

In the snow ahead of him is a Jotun shield, which had been discarded by one of the deserters. It’s about the length of Loki’s body, meant to be carried by a full sized Jotun warrior, but it isn’t as heavy as Loki expects when he picks it up. It’s oval shaped and convex, and the outer side is polished smooth so that arrows will ricochet off. Loki heaves it over his back, then scavenges some rope and some fur saddle-blankets from a dead boar-steed. He spots his feather cloak in the distance, still laying in a heap where he’d discarded it. Loki collects this too. He hauls these things back to where Thor lays and drops them on the ground.

Thor is now barely conscious. Loki kneels down next to him.

“You’re going to live,” Loki says forcefully, cupping Thor’s cheek. “You’re going to live. You need to hold on. Hmm? Hold on for me.”

Loki ties both ends of the rope to the shield’s inner handle, such that it makes a continuous loop. He then pads the bottom of the shield with fur blankets. Positioning himself at Thor’s head, Loki reaches beneath him to grasp him under his arms.

“This might hurt,” Loki says apologetically, even though he isn’t even sure Thor can hear him anymore. On the count of three, Loki hefts Thor into to the shield. Or at least, he tries.

Thor groans pathetically. Loki hardly budges him.

“You had to be so heavy,” Loki huffs, sweeping his hair off his face. He shakes out his limbs and takes a deep breath. At least now he knows what to expect. Loki gets into position again, threading his hands underneath Thor’s armpits.

“I’m sorry. I have to do this.” Loki braces himself, drawing strength from somewhere deep within. He tries again, lifting from his legs, and though his muscles scream under the strain, this time he manages to haul half of Thor into the shield. Thor lets out a horrid moan at being so ungently handled, but there isn’t much Loki can do about that except apologize again and hope fervently that he hasn’t worsened Thor’s injuries.

Only Thor’s boots now hang off the edge. His legs aren’t nearly as heavy as the rest of him, and Loki is able to lift them inside the shield with comparative ease. Underneath Thor’s feet Loki carefully tucks the bloody sack, as well as his feather-cloak. The Casket Loki keeps nestled next to his body in his satchel.

Loki arranges Thor in what he hopes is a comfortable position - he might have to lay like that for awhile. He covers Thor’s body with the rest of the furs he’d collected and prays it's enough to stave off the cold.

“Please don’t die. Please don’t die. Hold on. Can you do that for me?”

Thor’s eyes are glazed and faraway. Loki thinks he makes some noise of assent, but it’s probably just Loki’s imagination. Loki stands up and slings the rope over his head so that it’s strung across his chest. The star is brighter than ever now that dusk has fallen. Loki orients himself towards it. The first few steps are difficult, but the ground is covered with snow, and Loki finds that once he gets started he’s able enough to drag his makeshift sled across the ice.

So it is that Loki sets off into the unknown.

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5. Spire

“I have something I want to show you,” Thor tells him one day. His smile is broad and he’s practically vibrating with excitement. Loki cocks an eyebrow, closes his book, and gets up and follows him.

Thor leads him down a palace wing that Loki is not altogether familiar with. They stop in front of a pair of beautiful double doors, adorned with little mice, birds, and other forest creatures in bas-relief. Thor opens the door, revealing an airy, sunny room. The walls are painted a soft creamy yellow, and the windows are framed with billowy white drapes. Along the far wall are four women of various ages. They bow as Thor and Loki enter.

‘This is Magnhildr and Gudrun,” says Thor, pleased with himself. “They are the royal nursemaids. And this is Alfhildr, and, uh -”

“Hlif,” Your Majesty.”

“Hlif, yes. They are governesses. They staff the nursery here.”

The four women bow their heads at Loki in acknowledgement.

“I’ve instructed them to prepare the royal nursery in anticipation of our child.”

Thor turns to him eagerly, awaiting his reaction, but all Loki can muster is a weak smile. This place is beautiful. And so...big.

“You are...too kind. But, ah. I was thinking I would suckle it myself.”

Thor’s smile fades. “What?”

Loki says nothing. How can Loki explain without hurting Thor's feelings? Loki doesn't want to be parted from his child. Loki hasn't had much of a family before - Helblindi surely doesn't count. And Thor might be married off at any time. This child, Loki decides, will be his. And he won't give it away to be raised by strangers.

Thor lowers his voice. "Loki, you don't have to do that. You can trust them. I was raised here."

What Thor doesn't understand, is that he was the Crown Prince of Asgard. He was born to a Queen, not a slave. His position was never in doubt. Loki's child will not be so lucky.

Loki cradles his stomach protectively. "I know. But I want to."

The women look amongst themselves, then wisely bow and take their leave.

Thor looks genuinely baffled. "You want to be kept up all night? Feeding every few hours? Children are a lot of work, Loki."

Loki is angry all of a sudden. "And you would know about that, would you? Caring for children? Have you ever changed a nappy? Or gotten up in the middle of the night for a feeding? I am sorry if our child will inconvenience you, but I for one welcome the work and the sleepless nights. I'm not going to give my child away for someone else to raise. If our child must be housed here then this is where I will stay."

"You would sleep down here," Thor asks slowly, "Instead of in the Imperial suite?"

Loki knows what Thor's really asking: whether Loki is willing give up his place in Thor's bed. Loki crosses his arms. His mind has been made up.

"I will sleep where my baby is."

It takes Thor a few moments to register this. His mouth presses into a tight line.

“As you like,” he finally says.

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They spend the evening and next day not really speaking to each other. Loki is determined not to backtrack on his decision, but it’s hard when Thor is giving him the cold shoulder like this. They’ve had plenty of fights before, but this one feels different. Loki wishes he wasn’t put in a place to have to choose between Thor and his child. As much as Loki cares for Thor, it’s to his child that Loki owes his loyalty and his protection. Can’t Thor see that? Why must Thor be so stubborn? Loki hopes their child won’t inherit its father’s bullishness.

Loki already knew not expect much from Thor in terms of hands-on parenting. Thor is King, after all, and there are a lot of pressing concerns on his time. Kings and Queens and Nobles do not raise their own children, especially not bastard ones as Loki’s will be. But Thor has another thing coming if he believes things will go back to the way they were before! He thinks he can dump their child in the arms of some stranger, as though it were just another notch in his belt? No. Loki is not going to go through the trouble of carrying a child and birthing it just to give it up. He is determined to raise his child himself, with or without Thor’s help.

Loki still feels raw about the whole business as he returns to the Imperial Suite after a long day of seidr practice. Loki is tired and his feet hurt. He feels puffy and bloated, and for the first time in his life, self-conscious of his appearance. All he wants to do is lie down for an afternoon nap. All he ever wants to do, it seems, is nap. The business of being pregnant is a lowly one indeed. Loki doesn’t like not being in control of his own body. He will be glad when his sorry state is over with.

The lack of control extends beyond even that, for his pregnancy also appears to be having a strange effect on Loki’s ability to wield magic. Loki’s seidr has been going a bit haywire lately. His magic spills out of him in uncontrollable bursts, surprising Loki and his tutors. Spells he once found too difficult now come to him easily...if a little erratically. It’s as though he’s generating too much magic, and to cope, his body expels it in flares. Loki can't say for certain it’s the child, but he can’t think of what else it might be. Nothing else about him has changed. This side-effect is not unwelcome - it’s certainly better than the swelling and nausea. He just wishes it wasn’t so unpredictable.

The Einherjar stationed at the door cross their spears in front of Loki’s path. They’ve never not let Loki enter the Suite, and it startles him.

“What’s the meaning of this?” he demands.

“We were instructed not to allow you entry. Consort Loki.”

“Instructed by who?”

“His Majesty the King,” they say.

A sudden knot of dread settles in Loki’s stomach. Had Thor already cast him out? So soon? Loki knew Thor was upset but - certainly not that upset! They hadn’t even had the chance to talk -

“Is he in there?”

They exchange furtive glances. Their shifty demeanor indicates the affirmative. An even more horrible thought crosses Loki’s mind suddenly: what if Thor’s got a woman in there?

“I need to speak with him.”

“You must wait -”

Loki doesn’t let them finish. He barrels past them, safe in the knowledge that they wouldn’t dare put their hands on him, even if he is going against the king’s direct command.

Loki rampages straight to their bedroom, bracing himself for the worst, but instead finding it empty. He hears voices down the hall, and Loki follows them to their source.

Thor is there, in the doorway of one of their ancillary sitting rooms. He looks like he’s overseeing some activity inside. He straightens when he notices Loki approach.

“Loki?” he says, uncrossing his arms. “What are you doing?”

“What am I doing,” Loki echoes, and in truth he isn’t sure.

Loki looks past Thor into the room. It's in utter upheaval: furniture this way and that. Crates laying in a jumble on the floor. There's a bassinet at one end of the room and stuffed horse toys on the daybed in the window. Loki recognizes these things from the nursery. The three servants inside stop and bow their heads when Loki steps inside.

"I thought this would be more to your liking..." Thor says from behind him. "So you wouldn't have to go far, in the night." He sighs, exasperated, and pinches the bridge of his nose with his fingers. "It was supposed to be a surprise."

Loki's throat goes tight as he runs his fingers over the rim of the bassinet. The idiot! The fool! Loki isn't sure if he means Thor or himself.

Loki looks at Thor, sweet, stupid Thor, and for the first time, Loki admits to himself that deep down, in his heart of hearts, he loves him.

"It's perfect," he says.

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Loki loses track of how long he walks. Hour after gruelling hour he trudges through the long cold night of Jotunheim. He crosses plains of uncharted wilderness, the territory vast, uninhabited, and remote. Loki's feet are blistered and bloody in his boots. The muscles in his legs ache. His ankle is a mess, and every step he takes is agony. The rope across his chest digs into his flesh painfully and his hands are numb from gripping it. He feels lightheaded, like he could collapse at any moment, but he worries he wouldn't be able to get back on his feet again if he stopped to rest. Nor can Loki bring himself to check on Thor - he's afraid of what he might find. Loki doesn't even know what direction he's going in anymore. He's more lost now than he was when he started. All he can do is cling to the light of that star. Its presence is steady, calm, as if certain. And when Loki looks at it, he feels less afraid. Less alone.

Loki's mind plays tricks on him by making him see shapes in the darkness. Behind every rock and snow-laden evergreen lurks possible danger - monsters, perhaps, the likes of which only ever dwell in far-flung wildernesses such as these. Loki almost isn't surprised when he begins to hear

direwolves howling in the distance. An entire pack's worth of them, by the sounds of it. They can smell the blood. They could easily overtake him, slow-going as he is, but they do not draw near. It's as though they're being repelled by the light of the star, though Loki knows this is a ridiculous thing to think.

In front of him, barely discernible in the darkness, is a shadowy cliff face. There's a break in the cliff where it opens into a deep, dark, winding canyon, directly above which shines the star. Not knowing what else to do, Loki proceeds forwards. The bottom of the canyon is crusted over with ice, remnants of the river which had long ago carved its way through the rock. Loki follows it and does not stray from the path set before him, although there seems to be a network of smaller ravines emanating out of this main artery. The walls of rock rise up precipitously around him and amplify the sounds of the direwolf pack behind him. Loki knows now that they're definitely on his heels. He keeps going without even knowing why. Not letting the wolves overtake him, he supposes, is reason enough.

Dawn breaks. The star's power fades as it becomes overwhelmed by the rays of the rising sun. Loki looks up dazedly and realizes the canyon has broadened into a larger, open valley area. Ahead of him is a frozen waterfall - the source of the stream under Loki's feet. The waterfall cascades like a glistening, tranquil curtain from an aperture in the cliff high above Loki's head.

A dead end. He's trapped.

The walls of the canyon are steep, insurmountable. And behind him the wolves encroach, growing louder and louder with every passing moment. They'll strike when the sun rises, Loki knows it.

Loki drops down onto the ground. He has no magic left to fight, nor the energy to try. He cannot summon even a single bolt. He's in the middle of nowhere. He dragged Thor here because he's delusional. To meet his end by being torn apart by direwolves, after everything he's been through…..This is the stupidest thing he's ever done.

There is only one thing Loki could do: take his feather cloak and fly up over the cliff. He couldn't possibly fly Thor away with him, but at least Loki could live to save their child. It's what Thor would want. Just imagining it makes his heart roil, and yet Loki finds himself reaching underneath Thor's boots to pull his cloak out. His entire being rebels at the thought of leaving Thor behind.

Thor's eyes are closed. He's alive, but his breathing is shallow. Loki hopes he's not in pain anymore. If Loki were braver, he'd end Thor's suffering first. But he's not. He'd already watched Thor die at his hands; Loki can't do it again. He can't.

“I’m sorry,” Loki whispers, cradling Thor’s head. “I tried.”

A clatter resounds behind him.

“Loki…?”

Loki bolts upright and whirls around.

“You’re alive,” says Angrboda, who stands amidst the firewood he’d just dropped.

A feeling unlike any other overwhelms him, and Loki knows that what has happened is a miracle. His entire body sags. He motions to the pathetic bundle that is Thor. His voice is a croak. “You have to help him.”

Angrboda takes stock of the wolves, who have just entered into the valley and are now closing in on their quarry. He lets loose a few easy blasts and the wolves are scared away, fleeing back the way they came.

“Child,” Angrboda rushes towards him. He looks rightly stunned, to have Loki turn up alive, in the middle of the wilderness, dragging some near-dead Asgardian. “I heard you’d died....What happened? How did you know where to find me?”

Loki melts into his arms. He’s so relieved he’s crying, his speech slurred and incoherent.

“Please, I need your help. You must save him. You must save him.”

Angrboda looks over to Thor. “Who is he?”

Loki doesn’t know what else to say. “He is my svass.”

Chapter End Notes

Steps, Spark, Steam and Snare are set in the timeskip immediately following chaper 11. Spire is set sometime in chapter 15 :)

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Might wanna make yourselves comfortable for this one.

Warnings: clichés, feeeeeelinnnnngssssss

Angrboda crouches down beside the makeshift sled in which Thor is laying. His eyes are wide yet purposeful as he assesses the state of his charge. Angrboda's jaw clenches, his lips pressing in a tight line. Golden-hued tendrils of magic emanate from his fingers and knit underneath Thor's crumpled body.

Loki flits about restlessly, tearing at his own hair.

"Please be gentle," Loki moans.

Angrboda grunts in response. Using his seidr to take the brunt of the weight, he carefully, carefully lifts Thor's body out of the shield. It is excruciating to see Thor so limp, so lifeless. Thor's once ruddy, healthy complexion is grey. He looks small in Angrboda's arms. Fragile.

"Can you save him?"

"It is too early to tell," says Angrboda breathlessly. "I will try."

With Thor aloft in his arms, Angrboda makes his way behind the frozen waterfall, which Loki can now see hides a secret entrance. Loki trots behind Angrboda helplessly, because he can do nothing else, and is lead into a cavern hollowed out from the cliff face. In the front entryway stands another runt with a cleft lip, whose mouth gapes at the scene.

"Boil some bandages," Angrboda barks. The runtling startles and scampers off to obey.

Angrboda leads Loki deeper into the cavern, through deep dark twisting tunnels until they arrive at

little chamber outfitted with a rustic bed and a fireplace. Gingerly, Angrboda lays Thor down. Once his hands are free he shoots a magic bolt into the hearth and lights it with a blazing fire.

Angrboda motions to Thor's bashed-in armor. "We need to get this off."

"Here," Loki croaks. He reaches for the clasps to release Thor's breastplate, and Angrboda follows suit. Loki tries not to notice the caked blood under his fingernails, now turned an ugly shade of rust, nor the way his hands are shaking. Together, they manage to unclasp the breastplate and lift it off. Underneath is Thor's down-filled quilted undershirt, which Angrboda quickly cuts away with a knife drawn from deep inside his cloak. Angrboda simply tears open the fabric of Thor's undershirt with his hands, revealing Thor's bare chest, the entirety of which is a deep, blackish purple-blue: the result of Helblindi's final strike.

At that, Loki begins to cry in earnest. He cries like he's never cried in his entire life. He gulps in air desperately and still feels like he's choking. His heart races with adrenaline. His entire body trembles violently. Thor can't die. He can't.

Angrboda takes Loki firmly by the shoulders and gives him a shake. "Loki, I have only known you were alive for a few minutes and already you aggravate me. Here." Angrboda reaches for one of the shelves, selects a vial, and extends it to Loki. "To make you sleep. You need to calm down. And I need to concentrate."

Loki blurts out, "I'm pregnant."

Angrboda's face remains expressionless. "So that is why you have gotten fat."

Loki is so utterly exhausted, so hysterical, that he starts to laugh. A joke, in Angrboda's acerbic style.

"The sleep aid will not harm your child," Angrboda clarifies.

Loki is tired, so tired, and his entire body aches. His breath hitches erratically. He longs to lay down and not have to think. To have some peace. He takes the vial and downs it without a second thought.

"You will watch over him while I rest?" Loki asks meekly.

“I will.”

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Loki wakes an indeterminate amount of time later. He doesn’t even remember having fallen asleep, nor even having laid down - so potent was Angrboda’s drug. He feels groggy from the lingering sleep aid, like his head is in a fog.

Loki looks down at himself and notes numbly that his hands are clean: gone is the blackened gunk from under his fingernails. He’d been bathed in his sleep. He’d also been changed into soft sleep clothes. He is too exhausted to care that Angrboda had handled him while he was unconscious. Rather, he is grateful for it. The memory of what had transpired the night before is so surreal, almost like a dream. It's as though Angrboda had washed away everything that had happened.

It’s only then that Loki is fully able to take stock of where he is: in a nook hollowed out in the rock, on layers of plush fur blankets. The walls of the cave are pockmarked with little shelves bearing bottles and other knick knacks, jars of feathers, scrying stones. It’s quite homey, considering, but it's nothing like the Sanctuary Loki once called home.

Thor is still lying on the bed nearby, ensconced by thick furs. He doesn’t look much better than he did before, but Loki can tell he's still alive, and that’s at least something.

Angrboda is there at Thor's bedside, murmuring something to the cleft-lipped runt, who is likewise standing over Thor’s prone body. It’s the runt who notices Loki stir first, and his shift in attention is what makes Angrboda turn around. Angrboda shoos the runt away and moves towards the cauldron simmering over the fireplace.

Loki digs the heel of his palm into his eye socket. His face feels puffy. “How is he?”

“Not dead,” Angrboda says, unhelpfully. He ladles a heaping spoonful of the cauldron's contents into a crude earthenware bowl and offers it to Loki. “Here. Eat.”

Loki’s attention remains fixated on Thor, who wheezes slightly as he breathes. All at once the urge to cry comes upon Loki like a summer storm.

“Eat, Loki,” Angrboda chides, offering the bowl more insistently, as if to quell Loki’s tears. “It doesn’t help him any if you won’t eat.”

Loki falls easily into submitting to Angrboda’s commands. He takes the bowl and allows the warmth to soak into his hands. The savory smell ignites in him his hunger and reminds him he is ravenous - he hadn’t eaten since Laufey’s feast, and barely then at all. Loki scarfs it down inelegantly, eschewing the courtly manners he’d worked so hard to perfect. It’s rich and fatty and salty and delicious, with a slightly sour twang. Offal stew. It tastes just as Loki remembers. Angrboda watches him carefully and says nothing.

Loki wipes his chin with his sleeve. “How long have I been asleep?”

Angrboda tears a hunk off a loaf of barley bread and likewise hands it to Loki. “Thirteen hours.”

Loki feels like he could sleep for thirteen more. He feels as wrung out as a sponge. His magic has hardly replenished at all. It will take days before he’s able to accomplish even the simplest spell. He’s never felt so physically drained.

Angrboda keeps staring at him, as Laufey had, although his stare is more pointed than Laufey’s had been. Loki pretends not to notice and sops up the dregs of stew with the bread.

“So,” Angrboda says. “You’re alive.”

Loki shrugs half heartedly as he chews. His head is throbbing and he wonders if Angrboda has something for that too.

Angrboda takes Loki’s emptied bowl, ladles another helping of stew into it, then hands it back to him. “Heard the consumption took you. As it did many, that year. Laufey sacrificed a thousand yaks in your memory. Your funeral pyre burned for weeks. I thought it rather excessive; a waste of a fine herd. Especially during such lean times as these. And now look at you. Not even dead.”

"Sorry to disappoint," Loki says, drolly.

“Oh, not at all. I am glad that my star pupil did not, in fact, croak before he could make me my fortune.”

“It is good to see you too, Angrboda.”

"Forgive me; you mustn’t think I am not pleased to see you. But surely you'd agree my surprise is warranted. It is not every day that I have a long-dead acolyte of mine turn up on my door-jamb like a lost foundling, bloody and haggard, with his brother’s head in a sack and the nearly-dead King of Asgard in tow.”

At that, Loki whips up his head.

“Oh, come now, Loki, you think I would not know who this is, or what caused his injury?” Angrboda nods his head in Thor’s direction, then bends down to pick up Loki’s satchel, which Loki had discarded upon entering Angrboda’s cavern. Inside is the dimly glowing Casket of Ancient Winters. “I think you owe me quite the explanation.”

Loki blurts out the whole sorry tale in a single go. He does not have the wherewithal to curate his story as he had for Laufey, and even to his own ears he sounds like a prattling madman. He rambles on about how he came to be sent to Asgard in the first place, the plot to find the location of the Casket, and his life as a dancing slave; he tells of Odin falling into sleep, his subsequent incorporation into Thor's royal harem, and the night he'd spend imprisoned Underground for magic-crimes; he tells of his dance at Thor's coronation, the broken ankle that felled him, and his ascent to Consortship; he tells of his life at the centre of the court of Asgard, the assassination attempt that nearly killed him, and the revelation of his pregnancy; he tells of Helblindi’s betrayal, his forced confession to Thor, and his return to Jotunheim; he tells of his escape from Utgard, the battle on the ice-fields, and of Helblindi's final deception.

There’s a long silence as Angrboda soaks Loki’s story in. “Never did like your brother much,” he says at length, and spits into the fire.

“You need to save him, Angrboda,” Loki pleads. “If he dies...the Realms will fall into chaos. He has no legitimate heir.”

Angrboda makes a clicking sound. “I will do what I can. You were right to bring him to me. But there is one thing about your story I do not understand. I long ago abandoned my Sanctuary; unable, as I was, to protect the runts in my charge. I secreted myself here, and in secret have I thus remained. So, what I want to know, is how did you know where to find me?”

Loki glances at him askance. “Do you believe in miracles?”

“No.”

“Neither do I,” Loki says uneasily. “Then it must have been something else.”

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Angrboda sends a raven to Utgard to inform Laufey of what has transpired. He is not subtle in his displeasure about having his perfect peaceful seclusion ruined. Through his complaints Loki learns how Angrboda had come to be here, in this tucked-away cavern far from civilization.

“The Eastern Shore has become lawless in the years since your departure. We were raided,” Angrboda laments with a sigh. “They took everything. Even my runts. I could not protect them. I only have Gauti left.”

His cleft-lip probably saved him, Loki thinks dismally. *No one wants a disfigured bed slave.*

Angrboda goes on, “Laufey is toothless. He has not the power to impose order on his far-flung territories. Why would they obey him? Whole clans are starving. They are desperate. Their livestock are diseased, the oceans are depleted, and their fields are barren.”

“The Casket must go home,” Loki finishes. “We must return it to Laufey. It is the only way to restore balance.”

“Tempting though it may be to keep it myself,” Angrboda says, “You are right.”

There is nothing to be done in the meantime but to stay put and await Laufey’s response.

Loki spends his time dozing listlessly and hovering over Thor’s unresponsive body. He longs to help in some capacity, but his magic stores are still depleted, and moreover Loki’s skill in healing magic is not nearly advanced enough to treat Thor’s extensive injuries. Loki hates feeling useless. He helps Angrboda in any way he can, just to give himself something to do. He chops and peels vegetables. He changes bedding. He does none of these things correctly, as per Angrboda; Loki had been living his life in the lap of luxury after all, and has never been required to do menial work. Somehow having Angrboda berate him for his incompetence is a comfort. Just like old times.

It’s when he’s alone again with Thor, with nothing else to occupy his mind, that Loki is once again almost incapacitated with worry.

Loki takes Thor’s face in his hands. “Can you hear me?”

No response. Thor’s face is a placid mask. Loki takes a moment to really look at him. His eyelashes are longer than one would expect, and they fan across his cheeks like a delicate kiss. His beard is growing out. It’s now much longer than Thor usually keeps it.

“I need you to wake up,” Loki says firmly, as if his determination could jostle Thor back to consciousness. “Please come back to me.”

Loki bends down to place a kiss on the corner of his lax mouth. Thor’s lips are chapped and scratchy from the punishing winter wind. They look like they'd be sore. Loki roots around Angrboda’s stores until he finds a jar containing a herbal-scented ointment made of animal fat. Loki recognizes it as a balm to soothe dry skin. With a delicate fingertip, Loki slathers it into Thor’s lips. It seems like a trite thing to do, given the severity of Thor’s condition, but it’s something.

Loki curls over to kiss him again, and is pleased with himself at the marked improvement. He smiles at his handiwork.

“Much better.”

Angrboda walks in just then. Loki bolts upright, as if caught, but Angrboda makes no comment other than a slight eyeroll. He moves to Thor’s bedside and shoos Loki out of the way. Using his thumb, Angrboda pries open Thor’s eyelid. The eye that stares back is unseeing and utterly vacant. It makes Loki want to cry.

“Is there any hope, Angrboda?”

Angrboda bends down, presses his ear to Thor’s chest and listens for a moment. “His heartbeat is gaining strength. He has survived the worst of it. All we can do is wait.” He rights himself and turns his attention to Loki. “I must check on you as well.”

Loki recoils, suddenly bashful. Angrboda looks annoyed.

“Oh come now, Loki. You’re far from the first pregnant runt I have ever seen." He coaxes Loki to sit on the edge of the nook and crouches down at his feet. "How far along are you?”

Loki unfurls a bit. “About halfway. They say it is hard to tell because of the mixed blood. I’m due near midwinter.”

“How have your symptoms been?”

“Normal, I think. Some sickness in the mornings. My feet swell. But there is something else - something strange. My magic, it’s been going haywire. I feel like I am generating too much of it. I can’t control it sometimes. It pulses out of me in flares....”

Angrboda nods slowly, and Loki can tell his incisive mind is at work. “Carrying Thor’s child has deepened your well of seidr, and has made you immune to his lightning. You should not have been able to handle all of Thor’s stormcall on your own. He should have killed you. You are strong, Little Rabbit, but not *that* strong.”

Angrboda lays his hands on Loki’s stomach, and Loki feels an answering flutter inside. It’s the child responding to Angrboda’s seidr. When he sits back, Angrboda’s face is awed. It’s not a look Loki has ever seen on him.

"You bear a god in your womb, Loki.”

Loki doesn’t know what to make of that information. He averts his eyes. “A bastard, though.” He traces small circles over his stomach with his fingertip. “Conceived in captivity.”

“Conceived in love.”

Loki feels his cheeks and neck heat. He’d just poured out his sob story about the humiliation he’d suffered at Thor’s hands during those early years, all the fear and the heartache he’d endured. And now here he is, mooning over his master like a lovesick puppy.

“You must think I am a fool.”

“I think you’re a survivor,” Angrboda corrects, so utterly lacking in judgement that Loki remembers how grateful he'd been, to have been dumped on Angrboda’s doorstep as a frightened, newly-disgraced youngling, and to have been met not with sympathy per se, but with a kind of stern compassion.

“Your little one could possibly be the first being in existence to have mastery over both strands of seidr,” Angrboda goes on. "You suspect as much. Does Thor know?"

Loki shakes his head. “I’ve tried explaining it to him, but the intricacies of magic-use are lost on him. His own seidr comes to him so naturally; he’s never had to work at it. He looks at me like I’m speaking another language.”

“But he *is* glad you’re with child?”

“Oh, yes,” Loki says. “Yes, I think so.”

"Good. I won’t have to smother him in his sleep then.”

“He can’t formally acknowledge it as his own until it’s born, though. He said he will. I believe him.”

“All the more reason to get him to wake.”

Angrboda takes Loki’s left foot in his calloused hands as if he's holding something precious. He pulls off Loki’s slipper. Loki’s foot is blistered and bruised from his trek across the wilderness, to say nothing of the raised scars, now a light lavender colour where they'd once been Asgardian pink. Loki can still feel the screws inside his bones. Those haven’t gone away, even though the colour of his skin has changed.

Angrboda traces the scars with his thumb and makes a tsking noise.

“You wouldn’t have had such complications if I’d have treated you.”

He gets up, selects an ointment, then returns and begins massaging it into Loki's foot. Having Angrboda's hands on him feels good, even though his rough handling hurts a bit. This is Angrboda's signature style of care: not exactly pleasant, but effective.

Loki laughs bitterly, "I spent years perfecting my craft, and now I doubt I could do a single tumble. All your efforts have gone to waste. Felled by a single misstep."

"Such is the fate of many a dancer."

"When I performed the night of his coronation," Loki begins wistfully, "I was the best. I - I made them love me." He relishes the memory of that night. He can still picture it so clearly: the masses of people, the red banners, the wreaths of flowers, and the night sky alight with fireworks. He can still feel the palace floor thrum from the roar of the crowd. "You should have been there, Angrboda. I was….." He remembers the exact word, and savors it across his tongue as he says it, "Magnificent."

Angrboda is watching him carefully.

"IIf he lives, you will be Queen of Asgard. You will have the chance to do great things."

Loki has been so preoccupied that this realization hadn't fully crossed his mind. *Queen of Asgard.* It seems so preposterous, far-fetched, even though as Consort he'd imagined himself in that role every day. It's a daunting prospect now that is in the realm of possibility. Loki never wanted power, not like Helblindi. To live his life in Asgard, as Thor's queen, in the public eye….

"Unless you think Laufey purposefully mislead you…"

Loki shakes his head. "He would have no reason to do that."

"Then you doubt your svass."

Loki winces, having forgotten he'd used that word. The truth is, Loki has no idea what Thor truly thinks or feels or intends. Thor has never been forthcoming with his heart.

“I don’t know what to believe,” says Loki honestly.

Angrboda looks unimpressed. “Well, he better live. I expect my reward to be great.”

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And so days pass, blurring one into the next amorphously. Loki spends some time outside to take in some fresh air. The cold calms him and clears his head. Although Loki was never terribly fond of Jotunheim, there’s a pang that comes from returning to one’s homeland after having been gone for so long. He's missed certain aspects of this place more than he realized. He loves the way the trees hunch over, like an old man, when they become weighed down with too much snow; he loves the muffled silence of a snowstorm and the crisp crunch of fresh snowfall underfoot; he loves the taste of tree-syrup, and of fresh fish caught from holes in the lake ice. There is beauty to be found in Jotunheim. It saddens Loki that this realm has degenerated so much over the course of his absence.

When Loki comes inside he lays down next to Thor, even though Angrboda had made him a little nest in the wall-nook. He tries to rest, but he keeps being distracted by Thor's beleaguered breathing. Still, so long as Thor is wheezing like that, Loki can be sure he's still alive.

Loki sighs and turns his head to look at him.

“You had to go and get yourself blasted nearly to death,” he mutters. “Didn’t you think Asgard might need you? Hmm? Didn't you think *I* might need you?"

Predictably, there is no response other than Thor’s raspy breathing. Loki laughs a bit.

“I bet you thought we’d never wind up like this. In Jotunheim, in *Angrboda’s* care, of all people. How did we get ourselves into this mess?"

Still silence. Loki feels compelled to fill it.

“My ancestral lands can't be far from where we are. My family has several manor houses and fiefdoms in the territories south of here. Herjofsil was to be mine. A lesser estate, but a thriving

one. It is the main manor on my dower lands. I always thought of it as home, but in truth I only spent a brief period of my childhood there. I haven't been back in so long. My memory of it is foggy. But I remember my old nurse - Gunni was his name. I can see his face. He had a wart on his chin, and sagging jowls that made him look like a walrus. He used to read fortunes, though he wasn't a scryer and they were patently made-up. He liked to make me laugh. He always protected me from Heblindi.

"Once Helblindi hit me and gave me a black eye - for what I can't remember. I was crying and Gunni took me aside and soothed me. He gave me a candy to quiet me. It was my nameday. He said he had something for me, something very special. He led me up to the attic and pulled an old dusty box out from under a pile of rugs.

"*This is from your dam,* he'd said, *Meant to be given to you on your eighth nameday.* He made me swear not to tell my father or brother, to which I eagerly agreed I was thrilled by the illicitness of these goings-on, and by the fact that this gift was from the dam I'd never known, to be bestowed to *me,* the lesser brother, the second born, the runt. Gunni opened the box and oh! I can still feel the abject disappointment! Here I was hoping for a book or a toy or some other treasure and instead I got a box of feathers.

"Gunni said, *This is precious, Loki. The most precious thing you may ever own. Your dam wanted you to have it, for he knew all too well the tribulations that come from being a second-born runt. He knew that one day you might have to fly away....* Gunni may not have been much of a scryer, but on that point he was eerily correct.

"That was how I came upon my feather-cloak, my most prized possession. Gunni helped me learn to fly with it whenever my sire and Helblindi were away. It fit my frame as though it were made for me. It made me feel better about being small. The cloak would have been useless to Helblindi, who by that time was quite hulking. Still, I knew I had to keep its existence secret from him. If he knew I had it, he would have burned it out of spite.

"I grew bolder with practice. I started to take flights around the surrounding lands. Which, looking back, was an utterly mad thing to do! I can't believe we didn't get caught. If my sire found out what we were doing, he surely would have had Gunni torn apart by wolfhounds. To say nothing of the fact that I could have killed myself! It is a miracle I never had a serious accident. I could not bring myself to stop, despite the danger. I was addicted. It was my first taste of freedom - my *only* taste of freedom - and I loved it.

"There is a volcanic island called Drangey that can be seen from the eastern shore, just beyond my dower lands. You would know it by its sheer, jutting cliffs that rise out of the sea like a castle. That was the farthest I ever flew. Drangey is famous for being the home to flocks of nesting guillemots. Jotun peasants from nearly villages row out there to climb the cliff face and collect the bird eggs. It’s very dangerous. The rock face is slippery with sea-mist and moss. You'd have to be very

desperate to do it.

"Legend has it that anyone who tries to hunt the birds or collect their eggs will be sent plummeting to their deaths. Pushed, they say, by the hands of a demon. There are guillemots that are purported to lay eggs with shells of pure gold. Eating the yolk of a golden egg will render fertile that which is barren and cleanse of sickness that which is diseased. Gunni used to tell me tall tales like that. But then again, he'd given me a magic cloak that allowed me to fly. So who's to say what is truth and what is fiction?

"A hero called Grettir hailed from one of the coastal villages. He vowed to slay the demon so that his people could collect guillemot eggs in peace. He rowed to Dragney and climbed up to where the demon was known to prowl. Sure enough, the demon made him lose his footing and he plunged into the sea. But Grettir was brave and that did not deter him. He went back the next day, but the result was much the same.

"At last Grettir came up with a devious plan: to lure the demon down to the beach with truffles. Have you ever had a Jotunn truffle? They are exceptionally rare, and delicious. I've only had them a few times, during great feasts at Utgard. You use pigs to sniff them out, but if you don't pay close attention, your pig will eat it before you can snatch it out of its mouth.

"Anyway, Grettir went to Dragney with his truffles, which he acquired at great expense. On the beach the demon would have no advantage. Grettir laid a trap. He bathed the beach rocks in oil, and when the demon descended from his perch, Grettir lit the shore aflame. Terrified, the demon cast itself into the sea and drowned. The villages still call that beach Grettir's beach, and it's said that the rocks there are black because they were charred in the fire.

“I wonder if they’ll ever tell our story. You and I. Heroes of a great saga.”

Loki looks over, and realizes Thor is looking back at him.

Loki inhales sharply.

“Thor!”

Loki bolts upright and cups Thor’s face in his hand. Thor’s eyes are spacey, and his pupils are dilated almost to black, but he’s definitely not unconscious.

“You’re awake! Can you hear me? Say something!”

Thor blinks at him. “You’re so...blue,” he slurs.

Surprised, Loki blurts out a little laugh. “Aye.”

Thor casts an unfocused gaze around the room. “Where are we?”

“With a friend. You are safe here.”

Thor does not appear to actually care about the answer Loki gives. "I am very glad to see you,” he says, smiling lopsidedly, even as he labours to speak. Then he frowns, as if trying to remember something important. “Helblindi?”

“Dead.”

“You’re certain?”

“I have his head.” Loki says.

The silence wears on for awhile. Thor nods off and Loki thinks he might have fallen back asleep.

Thor jerks, suddenly. “What?”

“I...claimed his head. I killed him.” Loki listens to himself saying this aloud and not really believing it. More firmly and clearly he reiterates, “Helblindi is dead.”

Thor starts to cough, his chest heaving in a manner that looks painful. Loki is alarmed until he realizes Thor is laughing: a kind of mad wheezy giggle.

“What’s so funny?”

“I promised you *I’d* bring you your brother’s head.” Thor’s expression melts into something like awe. “You came for me. I can’t believe you came for me.”

“I had to save you,” Loki says simply. “Rest now.”

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Thor recovers in gradual increments. He spends long hours dozing off and on, rendered nearly insensate on the poppy milk Angrboda is giving him. When he’s awake - which is not often - he stares at Loki with glassy, half-lidded eyes. Loki sits on the edge of his bed and tells him myths and legends he remembers from his childhood to fill the silence. He likes Thor’s murky attention. Just knowing he's somewhat awake is a relief. Thor is not much of a conversationalist like this, but Loki gets the sense that he enjoys being talked at and having Loki nearby. Loki is not sure Thor is listening half the time, or if he even understands what Loki is talking about. Not that it matters.

When he runs out of stories, Loki scrounges a book of local lore and sets about reading it to Thor. The text is written in an obscure Jotunn dialect and Loki has to translate as he goes, with middling success. Loki is struck by a very vivid memory of doing this exact thing for Odin, long ago. How strange that it has come to this again.

Loki is mid-sentence when Thor reaches out and touches the heritage lines on Loki’s face. Loki stops talking and Thor’s hand flops back down. Thor smiles again, that same moronic smile. He is sweet like this, so dopey and happy and soft. So unlike the authoritative figure Loki knows. Selfishly, Loki likes it.

Loki feeds him warm frothed yak's milk from a bowl, sweetened with honey. Because Thor is lying prone, not all the milk makes it into his mouth. Loki mops up the excess that dribbles down his chin with a rag. For his efforts Loki is rewarded with a loopy, appreciative grin.

Angrboda appears at the doorway. He has a crumpled piece of vellum in his hand.

“News from Utgard.”

The look on his face is not one that instills much optimism. Loki rises from Thor’s bedside and follows Angrboda out into the hallway. There he takes the report and reads it himself. Loki’s fears are confirmed, and his heart sinks.

“You knew those Asgardians,” Angrboda surmises.

Loki nods, feeling his eyes well. Thor is going to be devastated.

“They were kind to me,” Loki croaks.

Angrboda pats his shoulder, and in response Loki falls into his chest, as if he were a youngling. Moments later he feels Angrboda's sturdy arms encircling him, and like that Loki stays until his eyes are finally dry.

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So the days pass in this isolated bubble. Loki continues to occupy himself with Thor's care. Thor spends his time either sleeping or drugged to high heaven. Nonetheless he soon appears to grow listless, and at last he turns away when Loki tries to feed him more poppy-milk.

“What are you giving me?”

“Poppy milk,” Loki says. “To dull the pain.”

Thor shakes his head. “I need...I need to be able to think.”

Loki looks to Angrboda, unsure, but Angrboda merely shrugs and makes a face that says, *he’ll be changing his mind soon enough.* Loki sets down the bowl.

Thor doesn’t change his mind, in fact, and as the effects of the drug wear off, sobriety comes to Thor in gradual increments. His eyes become sharp, and his enunciation defined. He also starts to feel pain again. Thor stubbornly does not breathe a word of complaint, although Loki is not blind to the wince in his face when he helps Thor sit up. Loki hates seeing him suffer, but he also feels obliged to respect Thor's wishes.

At last, Thor is lucid enough to ask the question Loki had been dreading.

“Where are my friends?”

His eyes are hopeful, and sad, and Loki knows Thor has guessed what he is about to say before he says it.

“A search party was sent to the battlefield. They arrived three days after. Lord Fandral was found alive, miraculously, but the others...” Loki swallows tightly. “I am so sorry.”

And he *is* sorry. Loki had been intimidated by stoic Hogun, and disdainful of vulgar Volstagg. But Sif….Sif had always been kind to him. Sif, Loki liked and respected.

Thor covers his face with his hands. Loki has never seen him cry before, and it is an odd thing to witness.

“I should leave….”

“No.” Thor’s hand flies to Loki’s forearm, exposing the raw grief on his face. “Please, stay.”

Loki sits again, slowly. “They fell because of me. Because of what I did. None of this would have happened if -”

“They fell honourably.” Thor says forcefully, his voice thick. “Helblindi is an enemy I would have had to reckon with at some point, even if you and I had never crossed paths. Do not burden yourself with guilt. You are not responsible for his crimes." Thor smiles tepidly and squeezes Loki’s hand, but his eyes are terribly sad, and Loki feels all the worse. "We will drink to their memory in Asgardia.”

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Thor has recovered enough by the following morning to stand up and hobble around. He requires Loki’s aid to do so, which Loki is happy to provide. There is no mistaking that Thor is still achingly weak. His chest is an ugly purplish bruise, and he’s easily winded by the barest amount of physical exertion. But he devours the oat porridge he’s given, and that seems to bolster his strength considerably.

After consulting with Angrboda, Loki obtains permission to take Thor outside. It'll do them both good to intake some fresh air - unused, as Thor is, to such stuffy, dark interior conditions. Having destroyed Thor's clothes in the rush to treat his wounds, Loki has to scrounge to find warm clothing in which to dress him. The only available articles are Angrboda's hand-me-downs, which are far too big for Thor and make him look pitiful, like a scruffy vagabond. Loki has to laugh at the sorry picture Thor makes.

"You look terrible," Loki tells him, which elicits a rueful smile.

As a finishing touch Loki wraps a coarse wool blanket around Thor's shoulders. He then ushers Thor outside and sits him gently on a boulder near the cavern's entrance, just beyond the frozen waterfall. It reminds Loki of handling Odin in his old age. Loki draws upon the patience and tenderness he'd employed then. For his efforts Thor thanks him timidly.

A beautiful fresh layer of snow blankets the valley grounds. It’s quiet, and with the cliffs surrounding them there is no wind. It’s snowing Loki’s favourite kind of snow: soft, whimsical puffs that flutter daintily to the ground. Loki holds his hand out to catch the snowflakes and watches them melt in his palm.

Thor is melancholy, Loki can tell. The loss of three of his closest friends weighs heavily on him. Thor clutches the blanket around his shoulders and looks uncharacteristically small.

Loki makes sure he catches Thor's eye and does a cartwheel in the snow. Loki staggers at the end, an ungainly finish. How pathetic. He can't even execute a bloody *cartwheel.* Loki is not used to his new cumbersome, full body. He will be glad when his pregnancy is over and he can get his slender figure back.

“Our child will be born breech if you keep doing that,” Thor tells him dryly. The joke is a welcome bit of levity, coming from him.

“Then I will have to keep doing flips until the baby is right side down.” Loki attempts another, but he’s off balance, and flops into the freshly fallen snow. Loki picks himself off the ground and brushes the snow off his leggings. When he looks over at Thor, he is heartened to see him amused at his failure. “I’m so out of practice....”

“Still more graceful than if I were to try.”

“It wouldn’t take much to send you sprawling to the ground, in your current condition," Loki fires back.

Thor smiles, then his face turns solemn again. “I don’t think I thanked you for saving my life," he says, squinting against the brightness of the snow. “Angrboda says you dragged my sorry arse over two hundred furlongs.”

Loki wonders what else Angrboda had told him: of Helblindi’s final deception, the miracle of the star. It is all so far-fetched, so absurd. Loki has not had enough time to process it himself.

“It’s not like I could leave you...”

Thor’s face is unreadable, and yet somehow his expression is still so intense Loki can hardly stand to look at him.

“If I could have saved them, I would have,” Loki adds.

“I know.”

They become quiet for awhile in remembrance of their fallen friends. Loki is sorry they met their end far from home, in this bleak, icy world. Asgardians favour death in battle, believing it will send them straight to Valhalla, but still. That's hardly a consolation for those left behind.

“Well. What I mean to say, is thank you," says Thor, clearing his throat. "I will forever be in your debt. If there was something you wanted - gold, or, ...ah, anything, really. You need only name it.”

“I didn’t do it for *money*,” Loki snaps, and Thor falls silent, shrinking back into his blanket. He looks so deplorably pathetic sitting there on that stupid rock it makes Loki want to punch something. A bolt loosens somewhere deep in Loki's chest, and he huffs out a breath: “I needed to be a part of it, Thor. I had to do *something.* I couldn’t sit idly by and let you fight this battle for me. Not after everything Helblindi did to me. He terrorized me my whole life. He controlled where I could go, what I could eat, who I could speak to. He made me his prisoner...”

Loki’s voice starts to crack. Mostly out of anger, but also embarrassment. Loki feels so *stupid* for

having gone along with Helblindi's plan for so long, for never having questioned him. Helblindi's act of treason was truly beyond what Loki could have imagined, but still. He should have known better. The fear of him lingers like a spectre, even though Helblindi is now no more.

"Why you tried to elope?"

Loki snaps his head to look at Thor. Then he remembers Thor knows all of this now: his affair with Ulfr, the incestuous engagement with Laufey. The tainted past he'd kept buried for so long. Thor had seen it all through the Bridge. Loki feels hot, suddenly. That's a conversation he hasn't the energy to engage in right now.

"I'm just glad he's dead."

Thor is watching him steadily. His stare is soft and penetrating all at once. "And yet, despite what he did to you, you summoned the courage to face him in open battle."

"I didn't let myself stop to think about it," says Loki with a shrug. "Foolish."

"Bravery is nothing without a little foolishness." Thor says, and Loki swears he sounds more and more like Odin every day. "If you hadn't come, I would be dead, and Helblindi would be on the warpath. You and he had a long, terrible history, and yet you found the strength to stand up to him. I suspected that you feared him, even…..even before. I long sensed something amiss between you two."

Loki looks at Thor curiously. He didn't think it was so obvious.

"You seemed intimidated by him," Thor explains, then laughs a bit, self-deprecating. "You know, I always wondered what made you want to meet with him, week after week."

A fresh wave of guilt washes over Loki for his own part in this deception. For having lied to Thor's face, over and over. For having schemed with Helblindi behind Thor's back.

"Thor, I-"

Thor shakes his head. “Never mind. The important thing is that he is defeated, and for that I have you to thank. It can’t have been easy, for you to do what you did. You have a….a fearlessness about you, Loki.”

Loki scoffs, even as Thor’s praise warms something deep inside. Loki scoops up a handful of snow and forms it into a ball in his hands, just to give himself something to focus on. Thor is wrong: there are a great many things Loki fears. A list too long to enumerate.

“I mean it,” Thor presses, “I always thought you were brave. Even when we first met. You looked me in the eye.”

“Yes. And that was foolish.”

“I liked that about you.”

That makes Loki laugh aloud. He throws the snowball at Thor, though he misses on purpose.

“No you didn’t! You thought I was an insolent little brat!”

Thor ducks his head with a sheepish grin. “I admit, it took me awhile to get used to you. I had never met anyone like you before.”

Loki is already forming another snowball in his hands. The snow is pillowy and pleasantly cool against his skin. “Willing to put up with your shit, you mean.”

Thor makes a guileless face. “Someone’s gotta.”

Loki laughs despite himself and hefts the snowball, but Thor is clearly expecting it. His arms are shielding his face long before the snowball strikes. He yelps, though he’s laughing too.

“That’s cold!” He shakes the snow off himself like a shaggy dog.

“Welcome to Jotunheim, Asgardian.”

Thor wipes the last of the snow off his face with his wool blanket. “That’s not a nice thing to do to an invalid.”

Loki crouches down to collect more snow and begins balling it in his hands. “You were saying how brave I am and how you liked me from the start…."

“Once I got used to you, yes. And I then found I liked you. Very much.”

He says it in that same earnest tone that always gives Loki pause. Loki peers at Thor askance, and notices that Thor might actually be blushing.

“You just wanted to lie with me,” Loki says, though his voice has no heat in it. “You thought of me as just another pretty conquest. You wanted me because I was beautiful.”

“You’re more than that, Loki,” Thor says, as if offended on Loki’s behalf. “Though you are. Beautiful. You’re intelligent, and compassionate. And....”

“Brave?” Loki supplies.

Thor locks eyes with him. “I rather think you’re the bravest person I’ve ever met.”

Loki’s stomach does a strange little flip. He looks away, muttering, “Now I feel like I can’t throw this at you.”

“Thank the Norns.”

That is when the snowball hits Loki. The shock of it stuns him for a moment. Thor may have been on the verge of death, but he is still a warrior, and he has a warrior’s training and reflexes. Loki should have been watching what he was doing under his blanket more closely.

Loki glares at him murderously. “Oh, you are *dead*.”

“I’m weak, Loki. Have mercy.”

So the fight begins. Loki manages to get a handful of snow down the back of Thor’s shirt, which elicits a high shrill squeal. They laugh at each other in between attacks, jittery and nervous, like two stupid youths out gallivanting without a chaperone to keep watch. It feels almost as though they are...courting. Starting over.

It is then that Loki notices Angrboda emerging into the valley, leading a goat on a leash. His face is an much-beleaguered scowl.

“It you scare prey away from my traps with your nonsense you’ll feel my hand. King of Asgard or no.”

***

Loki helps Thor inside once the sun dips beneath the cliffs and their shadows grow long. Thor is bright-eyed from their jaunt and his cheeks are a lovely rosy colour. He's also chilled to the bone. The cold affects him long before it does Loki, which Thor attributes to his Asgardian race and not for having lost the snowball fight.

Inside, the cavern is cozy. It smells like herbs and the tell-tale odor of burnt fur, which Thor wrinkles his nose at but to Loki it just smells like home. Loki settles Thor in the little kitchen hall, on a bench near the hearth where he can rest his feet on rocks warmed by the fire. Angrboda is there, stooped over a cauldron of cloudy, steaming soup. Bobbing inside is a fleshy-looking mass, which Angrboda fishes out with a formidable pair of tongs. It’s the goat’s head, singed of its fur and boiled. Angrboda sets it down on a platter on the table and begins carving slices of cheek, nose and ear. After the skull is stripped, he takes either side of the beast’s jawbone and cracks it open, then cuts the tongue out too. The brain he scoops out with a spoon. Angrboda places hunks of various meats into a bowl, ladles broth over it, and passes it to Thor.

Loki observes the way Thor interacts with Angrboda, and it is interesting. Thor almost seems...cowed by him. Thor has never relied on anyone to tend to him so intimately. He'd always been so strong, so vigorous and capable. His brush with death has incapacitated him greatly, and he's visibly distressed by his own helplessness. It must be humbling for him to have to rely on this stranger's hospitality.

Still, he is gracious, and he thanks Angrboda as he takes the bowl.

"That looks, uh, delicious.”

Under Angrboda’s unflagging stare Thor seems compelled to take a bite. Thor selects a piece with his spoon and brings it to his mouth

"Mmm," Thor says, convincingly, as he chews. "Mmm."

Angrboda issues Thor one of his signature eyerolls and leaves without another word. Thor watches the door through which Angrboda had left for a good while.

“He seems…..friendly.”

“That’s just his way. Here, have some bread."

"Thank you," Thor says, desperately. He sets down his bowl and accepts the hunk of barely bread. He tears off a mouthful with his teeth and audibly groans.

Loki watches him amusedly. “I don’t know what you’re turning your nose up at. I’ve never known you to refuse a good meal.”

“Not one that looks back at me.”

"The eyeballs are considered a delicacy, actually."

"You eat those?!"

Loki pries one eyeball from its socket with the tip of his knife and unceremoniously pops it into his mouth. He bites down and his mouth is flooded with that distinctive gush of gelatinous salty fluid.

"Ugh!" Thor laughs.

Loki lips his lips. "Haven't had that in years. Here," he gouges out the other eyeball and offers it between his thumb and forefinger, "Have the other one."

"I'll pass."

"It's good for your strength."

"My strength is recovering just fine."

"You know, not everyone in this Realm has the luxury of being a fussy eater."

Thor seems to mull on this for a minute. Loki is oddly proud when Thor snatches the proffered eyeball and likewise pops his in his mouth. Thor bites down and chews thoughtfully. An odd look settles on his face.

"Well?"

"It's very….oozy." Thor chases it with a melodramatic swig of milk.

Loki smiles fondly and pats his back. "Perhaps an acquired taste."

Thor pokes at his bowlful of soup suspiciously, but to his credit, takes a few more bites of meat. Substantial ones, even. He eats the cheek and tongue but he's clearly avoiding the chunks of brain.

"I never thought I'd miss vegetables," he says.

"Angrboda has some fermented cabbage in his stores."

Thor looks at him flatly. "You *really* want to share this poorly ventilated cave with me after that."

"Point taken," Loki concedes.

“When we get back to Asgard I’m going to stuff myself with fresh fruit,” Thor says with a sigh. “Peaches and berries and pears. They’ll be harvesting the apple crops soon....”

“The only fresh fruit I’ve ever seen you eat is in the form of pies.”

Thor looks like he’s in agony. “Oh, the cook’s spiced apple pie. With fresh clotted cream. And a glass of hot cider on the side.”

“You better watch it or you’ll start to get a round stomach like me,” Loki teases.

“I should hope not exactly like you," Thor says with a laugh. He still has beads of milk clinging to his beard, lending him a rather ridiculous appearance. Loki smiles broadly at the sight, which Thor returns with a goofy grin of his own. Thor turns back to his soup morosely. “Is there any more bread?”

“I think you inhaled the last of it. I can ask Angrboda for more.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want trouble him,” Thor says, lamentful. He pokes at the bobbing hunks of brain in his soup with his spoon. Loki has to grant that it doesn’t look entirely appetizing, especially for someone who hadn’t grown up with the dish.

"You don't have to finish it." Loki reaches for Thor’s bowl.

"*Hey!"* Thor torques his body, shielding his food protectively. "It’s not *that* bad. Actually it's starting to grow on me." He reaches for the salt cellar and shakes a few crystals out. Under his breath he mutters, "Just needs a little salt, that's all…"

He peers at Loki out of the corner of his eye. His lip is twitching just barely. They exchange silly, furtive glances. Loki starts to giggle, and Thor does too. Soon they are laughing riotously, and Loki doesn’t even know why.

Later, they are in bed, lying side by side facing each other. Thor’s breath is calm and even, and his body is warm and firm against Loki's own. The urge to make love overtakes Loki. Back on Asgard, Loki would usually only initiate sex if he had some ulterior motive: to please Thor, or maybe to

make Thor less adverse to paying a particulaly steep shopping bill.

Not this time. This time, Loki simply craves having Thor be close. He wants to feel Thor inside him. He wants be beneath him, to be overpowered and overwhelmed in that very animal way of Thor’s. He wants to be assured that Thor is back to his normal vital self.

But Thor is still much too weak for that, and moreover Loki isn't sure Angrboda would appreciate them fucking in his bed.

Loki feels a flutter inside. "The baby is moving," he whispers. He places Thor’s hand on his stomach. Thor’s face alights when he's graced with an especially strong kick.

“I feel it!”

“Your child,” Loki tells him.

Thor’s eyes flit to Loki’s. They gleam in the dim light.

“*Our* child.”

***

The sled from Laufey comes the following day, when the sun is high in the sky and the snow is fresh yet not too deep. Loki recognizes the telltale sound of sleigh bells long before the caravan arrives. The four of them - Thor, Loki, Angrboda, and the cleft lipped Gauti - watch from the cavern's entrance as the sled approaches, pulled by a team of mighty boar-steeds. Four more soldiers escort the sled on boar-back. They all bear Laufey's royal heraldry.

"So much for my secret hideaway," Angrboda grumbles.

Loki bids Angrboda goodbye, thanking him for his hospitality and promising to send word about his pregnancy's progress. They embrace, and Loki is overcome with melancholy. He'll miss the old curmudgeon, and although Angrboda remains stoic Loki can tell he'll miss him too. To Thor Angrboda leans down and whispers something into his ear. Thor nods and they clasp forearms,

having come to some sort of understanding.

There is no time to dawdle: they only have a few hours of light left before it becomes too dangerous to travel. Loki carefully helps Thor into the sled and bundles him under several layers of furs. At their feet he places the satchel containing the Casket of Ancient Winters, as well as his precious heirloom feather cloak. They load the chest containing Loki's gruesome war-trophy in the back of the sled: the farther away from Loki's person, the better.

Loki bids Angrboda a final farewell, and without further ado the caravan sets off back the way it came, through the maze of cliffs and towards the sea. Loki watches Angrboda until they reach a fork and he finally passes out of Loki's sightline.

Loki turns to Thor. "What did Angrboda say to you?"

Thor smiles crookedly. "He told me not to make him regret having saved my life."

That makes Loki laugh a little. Only Angrboda would say something like that to the King of Asgard.

"I wouldn't cross him, if I were you."

Thor squeezes Loki's hand. "I don't plan to."

They reach the coast at dusk. Anchored in the bay is a ship whose sails bear Laufey's insignia. From the sled they are hustled onto a dinghy and rowed out toward the ship. They are given a cabin beneath the deck in which to rest, as well as provisions of dried meat, cheese and bread. By morning they'll reach the western shore, where Utgard is situated.

Loki helps Thor settle in their bed and layers the furs over him. His legs feel cramped from the long sled ride, and he's exhausted from the day's travel. Loki lays down next to Thor and is quickly rocked to sleep by the steady lurching of the ship.

He wakes in the night and finds himself alone. Thor’s side of the bed is cool. Loki wraps his heavy cloak around his shoulders and makes his way up towards the deck. He finds Thor there, staring up at the night sky. The air is crisp and the sky is cloudless, Perfect for viewing the Aurora, if it were the right time of year.

“It’s cold,” Loki tells him. “You should be inside.”

“I just needed some air," Thor says, without looking at him. "Seafaring doesn’t necessarily agree with me.”

“Seasick?”

Thor shakes his head. “I don’t like not knowing what’s underneath me. Especially now since -” He pauses. “Well. I’m a little grounded these days."

What Thor doesn’t say, is that he misses Mjolnir. Up until recently he could easily travel anywhere he pleased by air. Loki knows how painful it is to lose one's ability to fly.

Loki feels it best not to tell him about the sea monsters that are known to lurk in these waters. That probably wouldn't make him feel any better.

“I’m sorry."

“Don’t be.” Thor smiles at him, though it doesn’t reach his eyes. “It probably wouldn’t be good form for me to desert a sinking ship and leave all the other passengers to their watery demise.” He mimics swinging Mjolnir, as he would if he were going to take off with her. His voice goes bombastic: “‘Farewell, my friends, to Hel with you all!’”

Loki laughs. "Probably not.”

Thor's smile melts away. “It’s just the way of it. Great victories cannot be won without great sacrifices."

"I know how much Mjolnir meant to you," Loki offers, rather lamely.

"I have you now." Thor takes Loki's face in his hands. "Loki."

Thor holds him like that for a good while, as if to soak in the look of him. So intense is his stare that it makes Loki feel as though he is being inspected, as one would a fine specimen. It makes Loki prickly all over.

“I suppose I shall have to get used to seeing you like this," Thor says. He means Loki's Jotun form.

“Does it displease you?”

“No! No. It’s just different.”

Loki repositions Thor’s fingers on his cheeks. “Then see me.”

Loki guides Thor’s fingertips over the straight lines and delicate whorls that criss-cross his face. He has Thor trace the raised ridges simultaneously on either side of his cheeks to demonstrate the perfect bilateral symmetry: a highly prized trait. Loki identifies the patterning he shares with Laufey, and with his sire, and with Helblindi. He had for so long kept this aspect of himself hidden. For better or worse, these lines represent his identity. He *is* Loki of the house of Nal. He is not the offspring of destitute fishermen, as he’d told Thor; nor is he a lowly nameless slave. Loki was born to the greatest house in Jotunheim, and with Helblindi dead, its only heir. His blood is royal, and any Jotun would know it instantly.

“I never really knew how much importance Jotuns placed on these.” Thor says, haltingly, after Loki has finished. “It must have been….hard, to have to hide them like that. I can see they are a source of pride for you. I admit, coming here has made me realize that there are a great many things about which I know little. About Jotunheim and its people. About...you.”

“I told you the truth when I could. I hated having to lie to you.”

“I am sorry you had to be so afraid.” Thor pauses a long beat. “Of me. Though I understand why.”

There's more Thor wants to say, clearly; Loki can see it in the tightness of his shoulders, the firm press of his lips. There is so much unsaid between them. So many half-truths and outright lies. They have been through so much together, yet in many ways they are still strangers to each other.

Finally Thor asks: “Why did you save me, Loki?”

He seems so *sad* as he says it. The fool. As if it isn't obvious? Loki feels he has explained himself enough.

"Because you're the King of Asgard, and Asgard needs you."

Thor nods glumly, and at once Loki feels bad for his rather clipped answer.

"I told you, I couldn't just leave you."

"But why?"

Loki is getting sick of this. Thor should not be the only one who can demand answers.

"Why didn't *you* arrest me for treason?" Loki counters.

Thor stares off into the sea, and for awhile Loki thinks he won't respond.

"I thought about it," Thor eventually says, like a confession, so low and deep it sends a shiver down Loki's spine. "I almost did. But then I imagined issuing the order, my guards shackling you, taking you away, and I - I couldn't do it. I couldn't bring myself to give you up. The thought of what I would have to do to you, what your sentence should lawfully be…." His gaze becomes faraway. "You sought out to deceive me, and you did. But I decided I don't care. I don't care how much of it was lies. I can't bear to be without you."

Loki swallows thickly. "You seemed so angry when we left Asgard...."

"But not altogether surprised," Thor says cryptically. His gaze snaps back to Loki's. "It doesn't matter. I spared your life, and you saved mine. We cannot speak of your treachery again. We will say you are the lost nephew of Laufey. That much is true. We will deny your involvement in Helblindi's scheme. We will say you were stolen as a youngling and cursed with an amnesia spell, and you forgot who you were..."

“Why not just tell the truth?” Loki says tiredly.

Thor casts him a sharp look. “No. That is something we cannot do. If your secret were made known, not even my intervention on your behalf could save you.”

“Even though I saved your life?”

Thor sighs, and closes his eyes for longer than a blink. “Even though you saved my life.”

“You intend on bringing me back to Asgard then.”

Thor taps a finger repeatedly against the hull of the ship. He takes Loki’s hand, suddenly. His palm is clammy.

“Loki, you have been my Consort for three years, and in that capacity you have bourn yourself with grace and dignity,” Thor says, stilted, as if he's making a formal address. “I have long desired to raise you even higher, but was denied by Asgardian law, which barred me from union to anyone of low-born birth. I told Laufey as much. It occurred to us that we have an unprecedented opportunity to heal the wounds stemming from the Great War." Thor clears his throat again. "Laufey and I have agreed to a marriage alliance between our houses: your hand in exchange for the deliverance of the Casket of Ancient Winters, which I vowed to retake from the villain Helblindi. Your subsequent act of courage makes it clear to me this decision was the right one. I - I could not have defeated him without you. You took my stormcall as no one else could. I think, despite everything, you and I were meant to be together.”

Loki is taken aback, even though this information is not technically new to him. It's just - Loki had always longed to hear a confession of love from Thor’s own mouth. This wasn’t quite - *that* - but then, Thor was never very adept at matters of the heart. Loki wishes Thor would just speak to him as himself, and not as... *King Thor,* making just another political dealing.

Helblindi-as-Thor had known exactly what to say, exactly what Loki needed to hear. How sad is that.

Thor is watching him expectantly.

“Forgive me. This is...a lot to take in.” Loki says when he finally finds his tongue. “I….I don’t

know what to say."

Thor smiles, though it seems forced, even awkward. "It is strange that such happy events could spring forth from so much misfortune. We can move past this, Loki. Things can go back to the way they were before."

Thor kisses him insistently, as if to drive the point home.

Back to the way they were before.

Loki is stiff in Thor's embrace. Thor pulls back.

"What?"

"You and Laufey settled this behind closed doors, without even consulting me."

"It's an alliance, Loki. Most princes do not have the luxury of choosing their spouses. Not when the futures of their kingdoms are at stake. At least you and I - " Thor pauses. "I think we are well-matched."

"It is my future too, Thor. It would have been nice to at least be asked how I felt about it."

"Well…" Thor shifts his weight on his feet. "How do you feel?"

Loki has to think for a moment.

"Bought," he eventually says.

"A bride-price worthy of you, Loki. The Casket of Ancient Winters itself!"

"How my worth has risen. Five thousand gold pieces is a pittance in comparison."

A frown starts to tug at Thor's lips. "You're upset."

"It's just -" Loki sighs, "This isn't exactly how I envisioned you proposing marriage to me. Which, I admit, I have imagined many times over. But this isn't a proposal, is it? It's decided, as you say."

"It's what I thought you wanted," Thor says defensively. "It's the highest honour I can think to give you."

"Then why not allow me to be a part of negotiations? If you wanted to honour me why not do so by asking me for my own hand?" Understanding dawns on Loki. When he speaks again, his voice is very slow and very quiet. "It's because you didn't want to give me the chance to refuse, isn't it."

They stare at each other for a few seconds. Loki has suddenly had enough fresh air. In fact he is starting to find it hard to breathe.

"Loki." Thor curls his hand around Loki's arm, stopping him.

Loki whirls out of his grasp. "I am not simple, Thor. I know you better than you think. I have watched you *very* closely these many years. And I know this - you didn't like it when Laufey tried to take me back. You didn't like learning that he is my true liege lord. It's almost as though.. " Loki laughs mirthlessly, "...It's almost as though you mean to *buy* me from him, so that he no longer has any claim on me. It's as though you want to own me."

Thor blinks at him. "Is that so wrong?"

"Is that so -" Loki repeats, incredulous. He hears his voice beginning to rise. "I can see what being *bound* to you in marriage would be like. You'll never see me as your equal, will you? How could you? You still think of me as your possession. As your...slave!"

"I want you as my Queen. Do you understand?" Thor gives him a reproachful shake. "I couldn't marry you while I thought you low-born. But now that your true royal lineage is revealed, no law stands in our way. That is all I ever wanted. I was under such duress to marry. But I didn't want any of the women they brought me. I wanted you. I only ever wanted you."

Loki's breath hitches. "What if I didn't want to marry you, or be your Queen - did you think of that? What if I wanted to stay in Jotunheim? Would you bring me back to Asgard in chains?"

"I want to restore your honour, and legitimize our child!" Thor is yelling now. "Forgive me for thinking that was what you wanted. Such honeysweet words dripped from your lips when you confessed your secret to me. You said you wanted to stay in Asgard. You said you *chose* me. But now I see. You would have said anything to coax me to mercy. You told me what I wanted to hear to save yourself from a traitor's fate, and I believed you. I am soft in the head when it comes to you! I was a fool to think you could love a man like me."

"You refuse to believe that I sincerely care for you. That I would stay with you by my own free will. You absolute *fool.* Is it not proof enough that I saved your life? That I came for you?"

"Then marry me, Loki. I don't understand!"

"It's because *you* took the choice away from me! You don't want me to be free. You like knowing I can't leave you. It's always you… .*imposing* yourself on me!"

They fall silent, panting out clouds of condensed moisture. The deeper meaning of the accusation carries on the wind, weighing heavily on them both.

"Do you feel that way?" Thor says. "That I….raped you?"

"You can't rape a slave, Thor," Loki says coldly.

"Then does it matter if I told you I was sorry?"

Loki's shoulders slump, losing their defensive edge. "No, it matters," he mumbles. "It always matters."

Loki is torn. Why should he be bothered by this? The outcome is better than he could have ever dreamed. His child needs a father. And he'll be Queen, just as he always wanted. Runts aren't destined for freedom anyway. There is not a single free runt on all of Jotunheim. Loki is sabotaging himself by fixating on such an insignificant technicality. By rights he should be in prison right now, rotting away for the treason he'd willfully and knowingly committed. Moreover, Thor had agreed to give up the Casket for him: a huge extension of trust towards an enemy Realm.

“I don’t mean for you to think that I am unwilling," Loki says. "I am ever your servant, as well as Laufey’s subject. I want you to know I am grateful for the mercy you’ve shown me. I will of course agree to the terms of the alliance. I….I would be honoured to serve you as your Queen.”

“I would not mistreat you,” Thor offers. “I would do my best to make you happy. There is nothing I wouldn't give you.”

Loki does not doubt it. Still, it seems besides the point. He sighs deeply. “I know.”

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They reach landfall by sunrise. Another sled is waiting for them in the harbor town to carry them the next leg of the journey. The entire population comes out to see them, spectacle that they are. Thor waves at them winsomely, trying to elicit a response, but he gives up when his audience only stares back at him with marked suspicion. These Jotun peasants would have certainly witnessed Laufey’s fleet setting out towards the Eastern Shore. The presence of Asgardians in the Realm would not have gone unnoticed either. Such strange goings-on are bound to create a stir. Loki wraps his hood more tightly over his face to shroud his identity. He hasn’t the energy to reveal himself as *not dead*. Besides, it won't be long before everything will be brought to light.

With haste they set off once again, this time for the Hall of Utgard. Loki travels in a state of stupor. The reality of his situation still hasn’t fully sunk in. He's going to be married. *To Thor.* He'll be returning to Asgard not as a slave, but as Laufey's nephew, as a prince of Jotunheim. As the future Queen. Loki feels oddly numb. Everything is as it should be, and yet...

Thor seems antsy too. He smiles nervously whenever he meets Loki’s eye, and makes glib comments about the passing scenery. The atmosphere between them is so unlike the easy camaraderie they'd shared at Angrboda’s. Loki wishes he had not pressed the issue. He'd be happier not knowing how Thor really thinks of him.

They make one final stop along the way: a rest-house, where their boar team could be switched and where he and Thor could change into more suitable attire. As soon as they arrive at Utgard they’ll be granted an audience, of that Loki is certain. Laufey must be waiting for them with baited breath. There won’t be much time for them to rest before they’re expected to set out again.

The rest-house is simple but impressive, built from the glacial boulders that dot the steppe. Thor looks around with awe. Although the ceilings of Asgardia are high, the rooms there are still

furnished for people of Thor's general size. Here in Jotunheim, the high ceilings are meant to accommodate Jotun warrior giants. Almost everything is oversize for them both. Secretly Loki relishes his discomfort. It is not every day that the mighty Thor is made to feel small.

The innkeeper receives them eagerly, having been alerted by Laufey to expect them. He greets Loki by his patronymic - Nalson - which catches Loki off guard. He hadn't been addressed that way in a very long time. Thor simply stares, as he does when he is met with any evidence of Loki's previous life. It's as though Loki is watching Thor rewrite everything he's ever known about him in real time.

The innkeeper leads them upstairs to a private bedroom, made warm by the blazing fire in the hearth. A trunk of fresh clothes is waiting for them, courtesy of Laufey. They'd also been provided a platter of food: cheese, bread, and pickled fish. Loki nibbles at these halfheartedly. He feels uneasy and bleary-eyed. Loki would kill for a real bath but that doesn't seem to be apart of the amenities here. There's only a basin with hot water and a washcloth, which will have to do. Loki gives his face, neck and armpits a cursory scrub as Thor busies himself with the food.

When he's adequately washed, Loki rummages through the trunk. There is a set of fine ceremonial clothes for each of them: overcoats with matching trousers, sashes, shirts and boots. The broader coat - Thor's - is a rich earthy chestnut colour. Loki's is storm grey with gold detailing. A generous gift from Laufey, but not an unwarranted one. The return of the Casket will mark one of the most significant moments in Jotunheim's history. Bards will surely commit their story to the sagas. It wouldn't do for them to show up at Utgard looking like a couple of bedraggled beggars.

He sets about dressing, first in the undershirt, then overshirt and trousers. His overcoat barely fastens over the bulge of his stomach. In a week or two he's sure to be too large to fit into it at all. Loki dislikes this reminder that he's yet to grow larger. He's never been so ill at ease inside his own body. He feels cumbersome and graceless, like a sow. He doubts he could fly with his feather cloak anymore, especially after having indulged so liberally of Angrboda's rich cooking. He can't even tie his spider silk sash around his waist as it is meant to be worn. Grumpily, Loki pleats the blue-green fabric and ties it at his ribcage instead.

Alongside the trunk is small lacquered box, which Loki picks up with trembling hands. There's a tug in his breast as he runs his fingertips over the inlaid mother-of-pearl. This box was his, long ago. Laufey must have saved it, just as he'd saved all Loki's posessessions. Swallowing tightly, Loki opens the lid. As Loki expects, inside is a small paint pot, brush, and five long, thin iridescent feathers of the gullinkambi rooster. The feathers Loki weaves into his hair as he braids it. They lend his black hair a prismatic blue-green shimmer. Loki then takes the paintbrush and dips it into the paint pot. With a practiced hand, he colours in a thick band of red paint across his eyes, as he so often used to do.

When he stands back to see himself in the mirror, it's like looking at who he might've been, had he

stayed in Jotunheim and wedded some lord, or - Loki wrinkles his nose - Laufey. He looks like a proper Jotun noble, pregnant with his lord's heir. The child in his belly might've been Laufey's…..The thought fills Loki with revulsion. He can't imagine loving a child that was the product of incest. But then again, there was a time when he couldn't imagine loving a child that was Thor's either.

Thor finally looks up. His mouth is open and full of food. "You look so…"

"Jotun?" Loki suggests dryly. "Pregnant?"

Thor swallows. "Incredible."

Loki motions to the open trunk at his feet. "There's a set for you here as well. Pants, overcoat - "

Thor rises and hobbles over to Loki. "Would you let me admire you a moment?" He takes Loki's hand in his and holds it aloft so as to appreciate the coat from every angle. "I like this on you. You look very….uh, regal."

Loki mumbles a thanks. He's not sure he feels the same way. The coat is beautiful but it's too snug around his belly. Loki's hair could use a thorough wash too. There are bathing rooms fed by underground hot springs at Utgard. Loki is already yearning for a proper soak. He could use a salt scrub on his face too. He's not used to being away from his lotions and crèmes, and his skin's condition is suffering for it.

"I will get you a ring," Thor says. He's still clutching Loki's hand. "The queen's ring."

Loki is rendered speechless for a moment. Thor's mother's ring? Thor had always been sensitive about the late Queen Frigga's memory.

Loki ducks his head. "You don't have to…"

"I want to," Thor says sternly. "I mean to do this properly, Loki. I'll wed you in a manner befitting your station. As I would if I were marrying any royal. We will have the grandest wedding Asgard has ever seen. With fireworks, and feasting, flowers…."

Loki nods shakily. He can picture it already. "That sounds wonderful."

"And then, after we are wed, I'll crown you." The way he says it suggests that he's having as much difficulty processing these turn of events as Loki is. Which, is not entirely unwarranted. "You'll be second only to me in all the Realms."

"You won't be crowning anyone until we get clothes on you," Loki teases lamely as he retracts his hand from Thor's sweaty grasp. He crouches down next to the trunk. "Here, let's see if they fit."

The deflection works, and Thor's attention is diverted towards dressing. Loki helps him remove his baggy shirt - Angrboda's - by pulling it up over his head. Thor's chest is still a canvas of angry purples and blues. Where the bruising has faded, a white, web-like ridged scar has formed: evidence of the strike that should have killed him. The marr doesn't detract from Thor's beauty, however. Loki is unable to stop himself from appreciating Thor's flat stomach, the defined v of his hips. A frisson of lust settles in Loki's lower belly, and he is reminded of how long it's been since he's been laid. Giving Thor a wash doesn't help matters either: the chill in the air makes Thor's nipples pebble and turns his skin to gooseflesh. He smells a bit rank and Loki just wants to lick him all over. Norns, he truly must be a hormonal mess.

Loki wrangles himself into composure and dries Thor off before sliding the fresh, clean shirt over his head, as one would help a child. Loki helps Thor into his trousers in much the same perfunctory way, without lingering overlong on Thor's exposed skin. For his efforts he is rewarded with a doleful grin.

Next come the wool socks and leather boots. Thor moves to put them on himself, but he winces in pain as soon as he bends over. He truly is pathetic. Loki doesn't know if it makes him want to laugh or cry.

"Let me help you," Loki says, as if in irritation. He motions to a nearby bench. "Sit."

"I can do it…"

Loki shoots Thor a withering look. "Don't be difficult."

Thor's mouth snaps shut and he sits down stiffly. Loki kneels at his feet and puts Thor's socks on, one foot at a time, followed by his boots, which Loki then proceeds to lace.

“Ah, ahem. Thank you,” Thor's cheeks are pink. “What I mean to say is - I'm not asking you to come back to be my….my servant. I want you to reign at my side.”

Loki peers up at him. Looks like they aren't done discussing this after all.

"I already told you I would.”

“Yes but...I want you to want to.”

What does it matter? A voice inside Loki’s head supplies. *You’ve decided for me.*

“I know it’s a great responsibility, one you didn’t necessarily seek out,” Thor says carefully, “But I think you are well suited to the role. You’ve had some experience with it already. Besides, the people love you. They’d be glad to see us wed.”

Loki is skeptical. Even if the people are amenable, doesn't mean the court will be.

“They’d accept a Jotun queen."

“They will love any ruler that is good and just.”

Thor slides onto the ground so that he’s kneeling next to Loki. A brief flash of pain crosses his face as he settles himself down. He bends to catch Loki's startled eyes.

"My mother didn't want to marry my father. Did you know that?"

No, Loki hadn’t known that. He shakes his head.

"Theirs was an arranged marriage," Thor continues, encouraged by Loki's interest. "She loathed Odin when they first met. She thought him a lothario, and from what I’ve heard that wasn't an inaccurate assessment. He was arrogant and vainglorious...he was like me. She once told me she cried the entire night before her wedding.”

Loki hadn’t known that either. It paints an entirely different picture of their relationship than the rather rosy image Odin had described.

“But happiness was found between them, in time. It could be like that, Loki. We could be happy together."

Loki’s voice is a whisper. "Did your father own her too?"

There it is, that old bitterness, dredged up from the deepest recesses of his heart. Loki regrets having said it immediately, even though it felt important to voice.

Thor winces. "I spoke rashly. You know I am not an eloquent man. I am not looking to….to *own* you. What I meant to say - if I had been thinking - is that I can't imagine not having you by my side. I would be yours just as much as you'd be mine.” He pauses, waiting for a response which does not come. A faint note of frustration tints Thor’s tone as he speaks again: "I realize I've made mistakes in the past, and for them I am sorry, but I only made that agreement with Laufey because I thought it was the right thing to do. For both of us. For our kingdoms. For our child. Do you believe me?"

Loki averts his eyes. “Oh Thor," he says quietly.

"Do you believe me?"

"I believe you," Loki says, and it isn't a lie.

"That's all I ask, for now," Thor says, sitting back on his heels. "Maybe, in time, I will prove to you what I say is true."

His eyes are so hopeful and yet so sad. Loki finds that, despite everything, he wants to give Thor that chance. They have been through so much together, truthfully Loki can't picture his life without Thor either. Whatever lies in store cannot possibly be worse than what they've already endured.

Loki nods, and Thor smiles gratefully.

"Thank you," he says. "Now, could I trouble you to help an old man get up off the floor?"

"You're not so old," Loki says, laughing a little despite himself.

"I feel like I've aged a millenia. Oof - "

He makes an exaggerated anguished face as Loki helps him to his feet. He's playing it up to break the tension between them. Loki decides to let himself be cajoled.

"Oh, it can't be that bad. Don't be so dramatic. Hold on -" Loki grabs the next layer: the chestnut knee-length Jotun overcoat. "This one is yours."

Loki helps Thor into the coat one arm at a time and then pulls it taut around Thor's chest. He does up the ivory clasps that adorn the coat's right hand side. Loki's never seen an Asgardian wear traditional Jotun dress before, but the garment suits Thor well. He certainly cuts a fine figure in it.

"This is exquisite," Thor says, admiring the cuff of his sleeve. "The embroidery is so fine..."

"It's a prized skill here. I used to do it."

"You did?"

Loki hums in the affirmative. Thor clearly doesn't remember the way he'd taunted him for mending Odin's shirts. That seems like such a long time ago.

"My guardians made me learn it. To keep me occupied and out of trouble. I never got that good at it, though. I found it woefully boring." Loki finishes buttoning up the coat and takes the spider silk sash in hand, which is dyed an appropriate deep red colour. "I preferred reading or practicing magic. Hands up, this goes around your waist."

Thor holds his arms up in the air obligingly, and Loki loops the sash around his waist. Loki pleats it deftly, just so, in a manner to best display the sumptuousness of the fabric. Thor watches him

work with interest.

"Or go flying, I imagine."

Loki pauses to glance up at him. He can’t recall having revealed that to Thor during the Bridge.

“You told me. Didn't you?" Thor’s brow knots. "And something about...guillemot eggs?”

Oh. Right. Loki blushes as he remembers how inanely he'd prattled on and on at Thor's bedside. Like an idiot.

“I didn’t think you were listening,” Loki mumbles.

“My recollection is a bit….scrambled. You might have to tell me the story again." He adds, softer: "I want to know the real you, Loki."

Loki's stomach does that funny little flip again. "Well. Uh, yes. The feather cloak I inherited from my dam. It is a rare, precious artifact. I don't know if there is another one like it in existence. Only a Jotun my size - maybe a touch less pregnant - could fly with it.”

"How you reached me in time..."

Loki nods. "I hid it in my old bedroom at Utgard long ago, before I was sent to Angrboda's. Miraculously it was exactly where I’d left it, untouched after so many years...” Loki’s voice drifts off. “It was my only respite from Helblindi’s totalitarian control. I used to dream of flying away and never coming back, of roaming the world and doing as I pleased. All I ever wanted was to be free.”

Loki finishes tying the sash in place and smooths his hand down Thor’s chest admiringly. “There. You’re ready.”

Loki looks up and Thor isn’t smiling. It has suddenly become very quiet.

“We should go,” Loki says. “Mustn't keep Laufey waiting.”

“Aye,” says Thor. "Let's go."

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When they at last reach Utgard, the bells of the high tower are ringing. The wall of sound is deafening, rattling Loki to his bones. Loki is as in awe of it as Thor is. In all his years residing at Utgard, Loki’s never heard them be rung. There has never been a reason to sound them until now. Thor looks at him with a little smile and squeezes his hand as if to say, *This is for us.*

After dismounting from the sled, they are escorted side by side into Utgard. Through the cavernous antechambers they are led until they reach the grand double doors of the Great Hall. Trumpets blare, heralding their arrival, and the doors are opened before them. The Great Hall is crowded with all manner of Jotun: nobles, soldiers, runts, witches, advisors and slaves. They part like a school of fish to allow Thor and Loki through. Astonished murmurs follow him as he passes: *Loki, Loki.* Loki recognizes many faces in return: Byleistr and Ganglot: his playmates now full grown; Fornjot, once just a soldier, and now a strapping general; Kraka, Rugnir and Hraudung….

At the opposite end of the Hall is the ice-throne. There stands Laufey, and beside him Farbauti his mate.

“Loki,” Laufey says, exasperated, when they reach the foot of the royal dais. “Little Rabbit. You are as reckless as ever. You will send me to an early grave.”

“Uncle,” Loki greets with a formal bow. Thor likewise nods his head in respect.

“Never have I been more glad of your propensity for mischief. How could I have ever expected you to obey me?” Laufey says, unable to mask the utter fondness in his voice. It reminds Loki of being a youngling again - of getting himself into trouble, then being brought before Laufey to be disciplined, and invariably getting off with lenience.

Laufey turns to Thor: “And Thor-King. Utgard welcomes you as well. Triumphant over our common enemy!”

The crowd roars. There is no love lost for the despised Helblindi.

“A great victory at great cost,” says Thor.

“A price well-paid for the fruits reaped," returns Laufey with a flippant air.

Out of the corner of his eye Loki sees Thor’s jaw tighten. The loss of three of his closest friends is not a trivial matter to him.

“Let us not tarry,” announces Laufey. “I know you have it. I can feel its presence here.”

Thor opens the satchel slung over his shoulders, revealing the dimly glowing Casket of Ancient Winters. The Jotun nobles in attendance gasp and fall to their knees in reverence. Laufey’s runtling witch starts to cry.

“By the Norns, I thought I would never live to see this day,” Laufey whispers. He closes his eyes and inhales deeply, as if drawing the Casket’s magic within himself, savoring its restorative presence. “And the Betrayer?”

“Dead.”

“Show me.”

Thor motions towards the chest that they’d brought with them, At Laufey’s signal, a Jotun attendant collects it and brings it forwards for Laufey’s inspection. Loki averts his eyes before the lid is opened. He never wants to look upon that wretched face again.

“And never shall his spirit be laid to rest.” Laufey slams the chest lid closed with a grimace and waves for the grim trophy to be taken away. “Odinson. You have fulfilled our bargain in delivering unto me the Casket as well as the traitor Helblindi’s head. In so doing you have proven yourself a trustworthy ally. Your reward, as per our agreement, is the hand of my nephew, whom I love as though he were my own child. Upon your union will I bestow my blessing. I will see you married according to our customs before you return to Asgard, whereupon you may be wed in the Asgardian manner. We usher in a new era of peace and friendship between our Realms, with your kingdom and mine united by blood, as it was in the Old Days, during the reigns of the Jotunn-blooded Bestla and his husband Borr.”

“You honour me,” says Thor slowly, “But, respectfully, I must clarify. It was Loki, not I, who saved Jotunheim. I could not have felled Helblindi without him. He is the one who struck Helblindi down. It is he who deserves your adulation.”

Laufey’s eyebrows raise. “So he does. Loki, step forwards, face your people and be recognized.”

Loki feels all eyes fall on him. Laufey reaches out his hand and Loki, trance-like, ascends the royal dias to stand at his uncle’s side. Loki turns towards the assembled crowd of Jotun: runts, nobles and warriors alike. The throne room erupts into ululations. The wall of sound reverberates off the ice walls and vibrates the stalactites that hang from the ceiling. The crowd stomps their feet and the floor thrums beneath their collective weight.

Loki has been applauded plenty of times before, for his dancing or for his tricks. He’s been celebrated for his beauty, for the pretty lines on his skin, and sometimes for his cleverness or wit. But this is different. He’s never been viewed as a warrior before - let alone as a *hero.*

Loki allows himself a small victorious smile.

When the cheers die down, Laufey addresses the court: “We witness a historic moment this day; the return of the Casket of Ancient Winters for the hand of our own Loki Nalson, who has for so long been lost to us. Loki, who has proven himself to have the heart of a warrior, is now fittingly destined for the golden throne of Asgard. A worthy Queen for a worthy King. Only the Casket of Ancient Winters suffices as a bride-price.”

Laufey waves forward two Jotunn guards bearing a shrine aloft on their shoulders, inlaid with ivory and gold and pearl and every manner of resplendent material. This is the Casket’s Altar, which has lain empty since the calamitous Great War. Laufey’s hand closes over Loki’s shoulder possessively. Suddenly standing there feels less like an honour and more like he’s being sold upon an auction block.

It is now time for Thor to return the Casket into its rightful home. Yet Thor remains rooted in place with the Casket in hand. He looks at is as if he's staring right through it. The moment wears on long past what is comfortable, and the mood of the hall shifts noticeably.

Thor is hesitating.

Loki is stricken with the sudden, horrible thought that perhaps Thor won’t buy him with the Casket

after all. He curses himself for having protested this. For being difficult. Being owned by Thor is nothing new for him; at least now he'd have a claim on Thor in return. Thor must think him terribly ungrateful. He'd offered Loki everything he'd ever wanted: marriage, a queenship. Loki's lot is to be bought and sold and traded and bargained for. As a slave or as a queen, it hardly matters.

Silently Loki wills Thor to make the trade. The Casket must go home.

Then Thor speaks: "Laufey-King, I have come hither to restore the Casket of Ancient Winters to its rightful home, and that is what I intend to do. But what I ask for in return is not Loki's hand." His eyes flash to Loki's, and then settle on the ground in front of him. "Rather, I humbly request Loki's freedom, to do with as he chooses, from this day onward."

The assembled Jotun crowds around them whisper in an anxious hush, which Loki can barely hear over the sound of his own blood rushing in his own ears.

Laufey's jubilant smile fades as he realizes Thor is being serious.

"That was not our agreement, Odinson."

"Nor am I the one who has fulfilled its terms. By rights it should be Loki here in my place, presenting the Casket to you. If I can buy Loki's hand, surely I can buy his freedom."

Laufey looks about the room. "Get out, all of you," he booms. "Out!"

The great double doors of the hall are flung open, and the Jotun courtiers and attendants file out, murmuring amongst themselves. Laufey waits until the doors are closed behind them before he speaks again.

"You Asgardians and your *grand noble gesture*s," he says, sneering. "I should have known better than to trust you, Odinson. You are as slippery as your father."

Thor opens his hands entreatingly. "I mean no offense, Laufey-King, truly."

“You don’t want him? Is that it? You mean to weasel your way out of your commitment?”

Thor appears stunned at the accusation, even offended. But then he locks eyes with Loki, and a look of deepest longing crosses his face.

“Of course I want him,” he says, like it aches.

“Then take him. I bequeath him to you on behalf of my long-dead brother. My jewel, my Loki, the most beautiful runt in all of Jotunheim. His hand is mine to give, and I must ensure that it is given to you. Our original arrangement stands.”

“How can we be in any position to force him to submit to our will? After all he has done? You owe him your throne, and I my life!”

“You mean to lecture *me* about such things?” Laufey demands. “Remind me again, who was it that held him in slavery? Who used him lasciviously? Who put this bastard in his belly?”

“It was I.” Thor says quietly. “And I was wrong.”

Laufey considers this for a moment, and even briefly appears moved by the admission. He waves his hand dismissively. “Loki is my kin, my subject, and moreover a runt, and he will do as he is bid.”

“Then the honour you bestowed upon him just now is nothing but a farce.”

“Loki will be honoured,” Laufey says, “When he births your *legitimate* child.”

Loki ducks his head, not knowing where to look. His overcoat feels unbearably hot and somehow even more confining than it was when he’d first put it on.

Laufey glances over at him and sighs. His stance softens, as if he’s sorry for having so vehemently given voice to Loki’s humiliations.

“It is not that I am unsympathetic to your request, Thor-king. In fact I am touched by your obvious affection for him. But here is more than just Loki’s honour at stake. I have our alliance to consider. I must see you and he married, for the good of both our Realms. It was Loki’s own wish; he confessed it to me himself.”

A look of physical pain flashes across Thor’s face. ”If that is so, then surely you have nothing to fear. Let Loki come to me freely. I won’t marry him against his will.”

“And our alliance?” Laufey demands.

“Our alliance will stand, with or without the marriage,” Thor says wearily. “You have my word.”

Laufey scoffs, clearly finding this renegotiation outrageous. But then his eyes flit covetously to the Casket in Thor’s hands, like he isn’t sure Thor wouldn’t call down the Bifrost and escape with it back to Asgard there and then.

Thor is many things, but an oathbreaker is not one of them. Laufey realizes they are at an impasse; arguing further will get him nowhere.

“Very well, Thor-King. If those are your terms I suppose I must accept.”

“The Casket for Loki’s freedom. Swear it.”

Laufey sighs, exasperated. “I do so swear.”

Thor nods, grimly satisfied. And at that, he places the Casket on its altar. As soon as he releases it, the Casket omits a magnificent burst of cobalt blue seidr, as if it too is celebrating its restoration. The shrine is lifted by its bearers and carried away into the bowels of Utgard, where it will be held in safety evermore. Jotunheim can heal at last.

Laufey turns back to Loki, visibly relieved. There is such overt affection on his face it sears Loki’s skin.

“Loki, child of my brother. Your intended has bought your freedom for you. A gesture of good

faith befitting future queen of Asgard.” He smiles, pleased by the spin he'd put on these turn of events, as though this was how he’d envisioned things unfurling all along. “How lucky you are that your future husband holds you in such high regard.”

“I am,” Loki manages hoarsely.

Laufey reaches out to Thor. “Come, Thor-King. With this alliance we draw an end to the enmity between our Realms. By this act you have redeemed Loki’s honour, and have made legitimate the child whose blood is of both our houses. Therefore let me embrace you as kin, and from this day I shall call you son-in-law.”

Thor ascends the stairs up to the dias warily, his eyes locked on Loki's, with an expression Loki can’t place. Hope and apprehension in equal measure.

Thor offers his hand. Loki stares at it. It’s like an out-of-body experience. Everything is happening in slow motion.

“I can’t,” Loki hears himself say.

Loki’s heartbeat thumps within the resounding silence.

“Loki.” Laufey curls in towards him. “This is what you wanted.”

Loki’s tongue fails him. It is and it isn’t. His feelings for Thor have always been complicated. Loki loves him, he does. But there is a niggling worm of doubt in his brain that he can’t quiet. He isn’t ready for this. The prospect of freedom, so tantalizing and yet so terrifying, has never been so closely within his grasp. It’s what he’s longed for his entire life. He will never have this chance again.

“I’m sorry,” Loki whispers.

Thor lowers his hand back to his side, like he isn’t even surprised.

“I cannot allow you to throw this opportunity away,” Laufey hisses into Loki’s ear. His fingers dig

into Loki's shoulder. "You are making a grievous mistake. Do you want your child to be born a bastard? With this one act you could unite our royal houses for a millenia! How could you be so selfish?"

"Loki is free now," Farbauti interjects from behind them. "You cannot force him."

Laufey snarls over his shoulder. "This does not concern you, runt."

Farbauti laces his hand through Laufey's arm. His voice is as mild. "Surely a king is nothing without his word. Husband."

Laufey grunts, wrenching himself out of Farbauti's grasp, but his words have struck their mark. Laufey turns to Thor incredulously. "You cannot think to allow this?"

"He has made his choice," Thor says, strangled.

Thor won't stop him, Loki realizes. He is resigned to abiding by Loki's choice. He has bought Loki his freedom, and he means for Loki to have it. The ultimate act of love.

Laufey looks between them both, at first uncomprehendingly, and then with mounting fury.

"*Fine*. Have your way, you foolish little child. You want your freedom? Take it. See how you like it. You are released from your duty to me, as well as from my protection and my patronage. Get out of my sight. Leave and never return."

Loki turns to Laufey in bewilderment. "W-what?"

"You are banished from my hall." Laufey's face becomes sorrowful. "I mourned you once and I can do it again. Go, Loki. Go. *Now*!"

Frightened, Loki turns on his heel and flees. Though he regrets it later, Loki does not turn back even when he hears Thor calling his name.

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Thor doesn't know why he says yes.

Up until now, he'd given as much thought to his slaves' feelings as one would to those of the birds in the trees: inconsequential. Irrelevant.

But there was something about Loki crying in his harem cell, with his pitiful little broken foot, sounding so dejected, so hopeless….

Thor shouldn't care, but he does.

A consort is little more than a glorified concubine, with the bonus of a lifetime yearly stipend once they are dismissed. It's no secret that every one of Thor's low-ranking concubines is striving for that kind of financial security. Thor can't blame Loki for that. What surprises him is the request for fidelity. How absurd! Thor is the god of fertility. It's in his very nature to sow his wild oats.

Well, fine. Loki thinks he can take on Thor's sexual appetite all on his own? Ambitious. He'll come to regret it. Loki will certainly have earned his retirement income by the time Thor's through with him.

Thor announces his decision at council the next day. It is met with palpable silence.

"Loki, Majesty?" one of his councillors says. "The dancer?"

"Isn't he a Jotun runt?"

Thor feels embarrassed, and annoyed. Thor resents how quickly his councillors make him feel stupid.

"What of it?" Thor challenges casually. There is a ferocious gleam in his eye. No one says anything after that.

To spite them, Thor brings in the best jewellers, the best clothiers. He dresses Loki better than a queen. Loki seems as stunned as the rest of the court by the breadth of Thor's indulgence.

The problem isn't Loki. The problem is a lack of respect. Thor is not a boy. He's not Odin's princeling regent. He's a grown man, and a King, and he'll do as he pleases. And right now, it pleases him to have Loki as his Consort.

Loki is not a terrible choice as far as consorts go. He's smarter than his pretty looks give him credit for. He's able to input impressively fleshed-out arguments into Thor and Hogun's philosophical discussions. Thor begins to suspect he's more educated than he'd let on. Why anyone would bother educating a slave who looks like that, Thor doesn't know. Maybe Loki was once destined for the refined pleasure-houses of Alfheim. The courtesans there host intellectual and artistic salons for their clientele. Thor never really saw the appeal, given that there was only one reason he'd only ever go to a brothel, and it wasn't polite conversation. Thor finds Loki's cutting wit refreshing, however. Thor still feels like talking to him after he climaxes, which is unusual for him. Thor even begins considering giving Loki duties at court. It would be good to put that sharp mind to use. Perhaps that might keep Loki out of trouble for awhile.

And oh what trouble he generates. Once Loki realizes Thor is never terribly inclined to punish him, Loki's inner prankster comes to the fore. The amusement generated from Loki's mischief is worth the expense of his magic tutors tenfold.

Loki set fire to the stables? They were due to be renovated anyway. Loki spends a thousand gold on riding gear? Well, it is good to keep local craftsmen in business. Heurig's voice is turned into a literal donkey's bray? These things happen.

"But Majesty," Heurig hee-haws, "He's disruptive. He must be disciplined!"

Thor's not sure he agrees. Loki never crosses the line in formal settings. He never addresses Thor by anything other than his proper titles when they are in public. At court, Loki defers to him and casts down his eyes - the very picture of obedience. Thor finds these little displays of subservience wildly arousing. It's all Thor can do to resist dragging Loki into a deserted antechamber for a tryst. Half the time Thor thinks Loki is doing it on purpose, to rile him up. Loki can't be unaware of the effect he has on him.

It is fortunate, therefore, that Loki takes it rough. Loki is true to his word: he never refuses Thor's advances. He submits willingly every time. His whimpers make Thor crazy. Months pass and Thor's hunger for him does not wane. He finds he does not even miss fucking his other concubines. Loki is a banquet. Thor loves the feeling of Loki's slender ankles in his hands as he opens his legs. Thor loves Loki on his knees with his lush tongue sticking out. Thor loves the contrast of his own brute of an erection plundering Loki's pink supple folds. He loves it when Loki lets him stick it in his ass. He loves Loki on top, he loves licking him until he screams, he loves when Loki ties him up and teases him until he's out of his mind with lust.

One day Thor thinks: he just loves Loki.

Thor physically shakes that thought from his head. He can't love Loki! Loki is a slave. Their relationship, even if mutually beneficial, is a transactional one. Thor is not doing himself any favours by indulging in such foolish notions. Thor needs to find a queen. He needs to sire an heir. He's letting himself be distracted.

Despite his best efforts to smother it, the feeling continues to bubble up. Not helping is the way Loki makes him laugh, oftentimes at Thor's own expense. Loki has a way of lightening Thor's moods when Thor returns to the Suite with a glower. Thor likes waking in the morning to find Loki there. He likes going riding with Loki on sunny afternoons. Thor even likes partner dancing with him. Thor never knew that the mere act of kissing could bring so much pleasure.

Thor will give it a year, as Loki had requested. He's sure to be bored of him by then. Thor will demote Loki back to concubine and that will be that.

Except by the end of the year, the feeling has only intensified. Thor is, regrettably, more enthralled than ever. Robbed of his dancing, Loki has shifted his energies to becoming a masterful sorcerer. He's handling Thor's lightning for Norn's sake! Thor can't just halt his training now. Who knows how far he could progress? Give it another year, perhaps.

Then Thor makes the mistake of having Loki greet the people at his side. The Asgardian populace as besotted with Loki as Thor is. Loki is beautiful and exotic and mysterious, and Thor enjoys showing him off. He thinks Loki enjoys it too.

The allotted year comes and goes, as does another, and another. Thor begins to realize the hole he's dug for himself is too deep to climb out from. No princess or noble lady could ever compare. He disbands his harem with little more than a shrug.

Thor knows what is expected of him. He knows he's being a fool. But he can't help it.

There will never be anyone else but Loki.

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Thor returns to Asgard in a fugue state. He is accosted by his councillors at once, demanding to know where the Hel he'd been and why, where had the Casket gone, and what is he doing dressed like a Jotunn barbarian? There are matters that require Thor's immediate attention: papers to sign, decrees to notarize. Thor is tugged this way and that, ferried from meeting to meeting, even though he can't focus on anything that's being told to him. It's a mad whirlwind of faces nattering incomprehensibly at him. There are funerals to plan, after all: those of Lady Sif and Lords Volstagg and Hogun, whose bodies had recently been repatriated.

Thor somehow manages to make a formal address at the funereal ceremony. He lauds his friends' heroism, and how they'd fallen protecting the Realms from Helblindi of Jotunheim, the Great Deceiver. They are cremated with all honours. Thor somehow endures this, stony-faced and grave, although inside he feels like he's hanging from a thread. He almost snaps when he watches Sif's mother light her daughter's pyre. The blistering grief on her face is a reflection of Thor's own.

The funeral feasts come afterwards, which Thor attends because he must. He drinks to his friends' memory until he can't see straight, and slurs through the songs sung in their praise.

Fandral is at his side throughout. He's returned from Jotunheim a more thoughtful, somber man, and a few fingers short from frostbite. At the end of the night, it's Fandral who hauls Thor back up to his rooms. Thor is sloppy with drink. His sluggishness is further exacerbated by his injury, which had not yet entirely healed. His chest aches and he can't even tell if the cause is entirely physical. He's practically dead weight in Fandral's arms.

"Friend," Fandral hisses, as Thor staggers through the hallways like a wounded bull, "Pull yourself together."

Thor is vaguely aware that he's making a scene. The servants are staring at him, wide-eyed, from behind doorways. He's embarrassed at himself for getting so inebriated. He just wanted to not have to feel anything for awhile. In this he is successful - he passes out as soon as Fandral dumps him in his bed.

It is only in the sobering quiet of the early morning that it finally sinks in: Loki is gone.

They had both fled Asgard in such haste, weeks ago. It seems like an entire age since then. Loki's things are everywhere, in a hodge podge of where he'd last left them: his fortune's worth of jewels, his furs and clothes. His hairbrush still rests on the vanity, as if waiting patiently to be used again, its bristles laced with dark strands. Thor had given Loki everything he could think to give, and it wasn't enough. It wasn't what Loki wanted.

Thor can't look at any of it.

Thor's bed is cold and in it he finds no rest. He feels older, worn out. Even the most minimal of exertion tires him irreparably. He drinks at night to soothe the ache, and wakes bleary-eyed and more tired than he was the night before. He feels like a draugr, caught halfway between life and death. His fingers twitch, seeking Mjolnir's reassuring presence, but he is denied that comfort too.

When he at last manages to fall asleep, he has the same recurring dream: of him and Loki out by the lake. They each mount their horses. Loki charges his. Thor gives chase, but Loki's horse is too fleet, and Thor can't keep up. Thor calls out to him, but the distance is waxing between them. Suddenly and without explanation, they are on an interminable barren steppe. Thor's horse is gone and instead he is running. He runs as hard and as fast as he can but he is weightless, massless, gaining no ground, as though he were suspended in a thick fluid. Loki is so far ahead he cannot hear Thor screaming. Loki never turns back.

Thor always wakes in a cold sweat.

This is his punishment, Thor supposes. For being too overbearing, too selfish. In many ways he deserves this. He replays their final days in his mind's eye. He could have done things differently if he weren't such a coward. If he weren’t so afraid of losing Loki in the first place.

Fandral hovers over him like an overprotective mother hen. He counts Thor's drinks and pries the bottle from his hand when he deems Thor's had enough.

"Damn you," Thor mumbles, but does nothing more to get the alcohol back.

Fandral eyes him warily. “Friend, you are not well.”

Thor laughs a little at this. An understatement if ever there was one.

"What was it that happened between you and Loki?”

Thor affects nonchalance - poorly, given how much he's had to drink. “I’m not sure I know what you mean."

Fandral shoots him a look, and at once Thor regrets having so blatantly insulted his friend’s intelligence.

”Three of our friends are dead, and Loki has vanished,” Fandral says evenly. “Something happened on Jotunheim. I want you to tell me what.”

Thor’s resolve breaks. He can’t hold this secret inside any longer. It’s consuming him.

“What I am about to tell you, you cannot reveal to anyone, under any circumstances. Do you swear it?"

Fandral appears taken aback by the gravity inferred from Thor’s words. He nods solemnly.

“I swear it.”

And so, Thor relates to him the whole tale in as much as he knows it, sparing no detail. Saying it out loud makes it all the more real, even though he’d seen the truth for himself on Jotunheim: Loki is not a slave. Loki is *royal*, nephew to King Laufey. Loki is also a traitor to Asgard, and yet somehow, simultaneously, more loyal than Thor could have ever dared to imagine.

Fandral absorbs the story with disbelief, and shock, and at times horror.

"That *bastard,* " he snarls, when Thor relates the part about Helblindi’s betrayal. Thor is heartened by the fact that Fandral’s anger is not directed at Loki. Although it’s true Loki had actively sought to obtain the Casket, he’d only just been a pawn in Helblindi’s grander scheme.

“You can see why you are sworn to secrecy,” Thor says tiredly, after he has finished. “If this were to get out-”

“Loki would be condemned,” finishes Fandral in understanding. “No. I will not breathe a word of this to anyone.”

Thor nods, knowing he can trust his only remaining friend.

“So where is he?”

“I don’t know,” says Thor. “Jotunheim, somewhere.”

“You should go find him!” exclaims Fandral, clapping Thor's shoulder. “Profess your feelings to him. Declare it from the mountaintops! What Loki needs, is a grand gesture.”

“*No,*” Thor says sharply. He knows that is the absolute last thing he should do. He can’t hunt Loki down like a fugitive. That would defeat the purpose of having let him go in the first place. Thor may not be as gifted as Fandral in matters of romance, but he knows this as much.

The problem is that Thor has vast networks of spies at his disposal. Loki thinks he could hide, and perhaps he could for a time, but if Thor put a large enough bounty on him there wouldn't be much he could do to evade detection. In his darker moments, Thor considers deploying his best trackers for this purpose. It would be so easy. Loki would be found within a fortnight. To have that kind of power, and refrain from using it, is almost too great a temptation to resist.

Thor knows what he would do if he found Loki, too: get down on his knees and offer him the queen's ring, as he said he would. Would it be a sufficient display of contrition to have the mighty Thor, God of Storms, King of Asgard, bow his head to a former slave and beg?

Deep down, Thor knows he would not do himself any favours by trying to coax Loki back.

"What Loki needs," Thor sighs, "Is to be left alone."

"So what do you intend to do?" asks Fandral.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?!"

It used to be good enough to have Loki at his side, regardless of the circumstances. Thor used to pretend he didn't care what Loki thought or felt, so long as he was outwardly affectionate and amiable. The falsity of it no longer appeals. Thor is surrounded all day by sycophants, yes-men, suck-ups. Why would he want that of Loki?

No. If he were to have Loki back, he'd want it to be because Loki had chosen to.

Thor just shrugs. "Hope he comes home."

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It's not long thereafter that Thor is presented with a prospective bride. When Thor becomes aware of exactly why they're introducing this particular young girl to him, extolling her virtues, he flies into a terrible rage. Vultures, the lot of them, swooping in to take advantage of Loki's absence! He

hates that his councillors pretend to feel sorry that Loki is gone. Behind Thor's back they must be toasting Loki's departure with their finest wines.

Thor apologizes to the girl when he realizes he's scared her. It's not her fault. He storms out of the throne room, trailing a crackle of static electricity in his wake.

To calm himself, Thor indulges in a bit of hashish in the privacy of the Imperial suite. It's not like him to do this alone, but then, Thor *is* alone. He sits by the fireside and watches the flames lick the logs until they turn to ash. His limbs are heavy and his vision blurs at the edges. He feels numb.

"Oh, Your Majesty," says a voice pityingly.

Thor swivels his head and is momentarily disoriented. He has to blink a few times to settle his vision. It's Inga, Loki's girl.

She takes stock of Thor's sorry state. "You must miss him terribly. I know I do."

Delicately she takes his pipe out of his slack grip and sets it on the table. Then, in a single motion, she settles herself astride him with her legs bracketing his hips. Her weight atop him is pleasant, and Thor is aroused. It's been so long since he's been touched. He wants to say something, but his mouth is suddenly too dry to form words.

She hushes him, pets his heir, and gently rocks atop him, as if testing his limits. Thor groans and his head lolls back. He does nothing to stop her when she places his hand atop her breast.

"Let me bring you comfort," she breathes. "I can't bear to see you suffer so."

Thor shakes his head, and his vision swims. Nothing in this world brings him any comfort. Loki is gone, and he might never come back.

"You can pretend I'm him," she whispers in his ear. "I don't mind."

She's got a woman's body, with ample hips and breasts. Thor isn't unaffected. His body is as responsive as it ever was. But it simply isn't the same.

“I don’t want to,” Thor chokes out. It almost comes off as a sob.

She considers this for a moment, a sympathetic look in her bottomless brown eyes. When it becomes clear Thor will not partake of her offer, she dismounts with a sigh.

“I hope he comes back to you," she says, smoothing down her skirts, and leaves Thor be.

Days pass in a blur, turning to weeks, and months. Thor wonders incessantly if Loki is alright. If he’s had the child yet. If he’s happy. If there was ever a point where Loki might’ve loved him back. Thor is not sure if knowing would make him feel better or worse.

Thor visits his mother’s tomb in the evenings, when the fireflies are just starting to alight and Asgard begins to quiet. He used to avoid this place as a younger man, but these days he finds solace in being here. He'd dreamt of Frigga when he was slipping in and out of consciousness on the icy plains of Jotunheim. She’d appeared to him as a dazzling white light. He was so cold, so very cold. He just wanted to fall into her arms like a child and have his suffering end. Yet she resisted when he reached out to her. His time was not yet at hand, she'd said. She told him to hold on, and he did.

Thor contemplates the vision often. It was probably nothing; the delusional imaginings of a mind on the brink of death.

Later, Thor goes to bed and dreams of Loki. It's the same recurring dream he’s been having for months: They are out by the lake. Loki is about to take off on horseback, as he usually does. He’s pale faced and achingly lovely in the too-bright, oversaturated sunlight.

Something seems off this time. The colours are too vivid. Thor feels a sense of agency that wasn’t there before. This is not a normal dream...

Loki opens his hands sheepishly.

“Hello Thor.”

Thor nhales sharply and rushes towards him, and Loki doesn’t run away this time. He stands his

ground as Thor reaches out to touch him. Thor runs his hands over Loki's shoulders, but there is no substance nor warmth to him. He feels hollow, like an empty shell. Thor knows at once this Loki is not real, and his stomach sinks in disappointment.

“I know you said no more Bridges…” begins Loki. “Angrboda and I have constructed this from both our memories. I've been trying to reach you here for weeks."

So Thor’s recurring dream had in fact been Loki, trying to establish contact. Thor's heart thumps excitedly in his chest. He doesn’t even know what to say. He looks Loki over and notes that his stomach is flat.

“Have you…”

Loki shakes his head. “My time is very near, I am due any day now. But because this is a Bridge, I can only appear to you as you remember me from our past visits to this place. In fact the reason I can Bridge with you now is because I still hold your child within me, acting as a conduit.”

Thor can’t pretend to understand anything about that. All he knows is that he is simply glad to be speaking to Loki in some capacity. There are so many things Thor wants to ask. So much he wants to know.

"You should be proud." Loki smiles a wry little smile. “Your child is strong. It gives me no rest.”

“You must be nervous," Thor comments dumbly. "About the birth."

Loki rests his hand on his stomach. His smile fades. “Angrboda has come to be with me. He will see me through it. You witnessed his expertise in healing yourself. He has delivered the young of many runts…”

Loki sounds like he’s repeating this by rote. Thor aches for him. He hates that Loki is afraid, and that he can do nothing to help him.

“But, I’ll be glad to have this over with,” Loki adds brightly. “I feel like I’ve earned a drink.”

That elicits a laugh from Thor. He feels nervous, jittery. He doesn't want to say something stupid and have Loki break the spell and vanish forever.

Loki continues: "Angrboda says - He says we've made a god. The child's seidr is strong. You remember what I told you about our magics? Your and mine, at odds yet complementary. Angrboda says he doesn't know of any being bearing powerful strands of both."

"Oh," says Thor. "That's...good."

Loki smiles like he can tell Thor doesn't really know what he's talking about.

"I'll make sure their gifts are nurtured," Loki says. He means this as a kind of reassurance, but to Thor it only implies that Loki does not intend on coming back. Thor feels an immediate crushing sensation in his lungs.

"Come home," Thor pleads, not caring how pathetic he sounds.

"I am home," Loki replies, not ungently.

Thor doesn't know how to respond to that.

"I am not staying in Jotunheim," Loki goes on, glancing away. "Laufey is still somewhat...cross with me. After I recover from the birth Angrboda and I will take to the road. My emancipation allows me the ability to travel, and my inheritance leaves me well-financed indeed."

"With a newborn?"

Loki shrugs. "Many Jotunn clans are nomads. I will suckle it as I go. It is not an insurmountable task."

Thor's eyes flit briefly to Loki's chest. He wonders what Loki's milk tastes like. He imagines it to be sweet. There is nothing about Loki that isn't perfect.

Loki looks into the distance. His eyes glisten. “There are places I have always wanted to see. Seidr masters to pay homage to. The world is vast, and full of wondrous things.”

Selfishly, Thor wishes Loki did not harbour such wanderlust. Thor wishes Loki could be content to stay in one place. In Asgard. With him.

“For how long?”

“I am not yet sure," he says.

“I need you, Loki." Thor knows he sounds like a petulant child yet he can't help himself. "There is such darkness in me, I know it. I am vicious, and cruel. I am a storm god by nature. I sometimes fear it will consume me. You make me better. You’re the only one who ever speaks reason to me…”

“You shouldn't need me to! Thor, I can’t be made responsible for your actions. Every time I stand up to you I run the risk of having you turn on me.”

“I wouldn’t,” breathes Thor, but quiets when Loki shoots him a dubious look.

Loki’s face softens. “I know you will be a good king. With or without me.”

Thor’s chest goes tight. The enormity of his life stretches before him, without his mother, without Hogun or Volstagg or Sif, and to not have Loki moreover? He's not strong enough.

“I don’t want to do it without you.”

Loki regards him kindly. “It might be good for you, Thor, to not get what you want all the time.”

Thor is overcome with self-loathing. "You must despise me.”

“Thor...”

“If you do just tell me,” Thor says, more forcefully. The heartache and suffering of the last few months froths up from deep inside him, like the discharge from an infected wound. “I know the reason you came to Asgard, and why you seduced me. I can make peace with that. But the one thing I cannot discern is your true heart - whether you hate me, or...or love me, or some combination thereof. I’m tired of not knowing. I’d rather have you tell me the complete truth.”

Loki watches him steadily. At once Thor wishes he could retract the incendiary request. He has always been afraid of what Loki might say, and yet at the same time, desperate to hear the truth spoken.

"The truth,” Loki repeats, as if he's tasting the word upon his tongue and uncertain whether he likes it, “The truth is….I don't regret it." He looks right at Thor. "I don't regret…us. I'm glad my child is yours. The reason I chose this was not because I despised you.”

Thor feels like he could cry. His voice cracks, “Then why, Loki?”

“I think you know why,” Loki says, almost a whisper, and he smiles a sort of sad, pitying smile.

Loki’s attention is diverted to somewhere past Thor’s shoulder. Thor turns, following his gaze. The far horizon is starting to chip away like peeling paint on old wood.

“The Bridge is starting to collapse,” murmurs Loki. “The spell is too unstable. Our magicks cannot support it any longer.”

It’s too soon, it’s much too soon. There is still so much Thor needs to say.

“When can I talk to you again?” Thor asks anxiously.

“I don’t know. It may not be possible after I give birth.”

Thor feels frantic. He has a sense that this might be his last chance to speak his piece. He has no idea whether Loki will ever contact him again.

“I won’t beg you to return to Asgard. I won’t even ask. But I must marry someone. My reign - my dynasty - depends on it. I - I want it to be you. I meant it when I said I only ever wanted you.”

“I know,” Loki says. His eyes glimmer. “And I know you let me go because you love me.”

Thor doesn't have to think twice about it. It's true. It's always been true. Thor had ample time to tell Loki so but didn't. He’d always disdained masters who’d confessed love to their slaves, thinking of them as gullible fools. He didn’t want to make their relationship out to be something that it wasn’t. He didn’t want Loki to say it back and have it be a lie.

Well, Loki isn’t a slave anymore, so there is no point in denying it.

"Yes,” Thor breathes. “Yes, Loki, I love you."

Thor can tell that even this admission won't be enough to bring Loki back to Asgard. Thor can see it in Loki's face. But it's alright. Thor feels better for having said it. Even if Loki never says it back, at least he knows.

The Bridge is collapsing at an ever increasing pace. The treeline and sky are starting to chip away. There’s a rushing sound like a waterfall all around them. It’s hard to not feel a sense of imminent doom.

“Just tell me you’ll be safe," says Thor.

“Have I not faced more formidable foes already?” Loki teases. “You have given me the greatest gift: my magickal lessons will serve me well. I will be fine.”

“Send word if you need anything,” Thor says in a rush. The ground beneath them is starting to crack. “Anything at all. I will be here. You know where to find me."

The void is closing in. Loki presses his lips to Thor’s, and they both tumble into oblivion.

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Thor wakes with a start, blinking away the spots in his eyes and panting heavily. He's covered in a sheen of sweat. He rushes to the bathing chamber and splashes cold water on his face until his heart rate finally settles.

He feels oddly….calm, considering. He sees things with a clarity that wasn't there before.

Loki doesn't hate him. The mere fact that he'd put in the effort of contacting him at all proves that. His choice wasn't about Thor at all. Loki chose what he did because he needed to be free.

Loki believes that he'll be a good king? Well, Thor won't disappoint him if he can help it. Thor will be as good a king as they come. Wherever Loki is, he will hear of Thor's works. Peoples of every Realm will speak of the deeds of *benevolent King Thor,* bringer of peace, patron of arts and medicine. Servant of the poor and downtrodden; defender of justice.

Thor sets about this task with immediacy and vigor. He feels rejuvenated. He forgoes idle luxuries. He is temperate with drink. He puts his natural obstinacy to use, much to the chagrin of his councillors.

Thor begins to hear rumors of a travelling Jotun witch and his crone-companion giving out gold coins. Thor's heart leaps: who else could it be? Thor believes fervently that Loki is making himself known on purpose. Loki could take pains to disguise himself. But no - he must be revealing himself intentionally to let Thor know he's alright.

In this circuitous way, Thor tracks Loki's progress: from Jotunheim to Midgard, to Vanaheim, Alfheim, Nidavellir, and even to Muspelheim, the realm of fire-dragons. Thor swears he doesn't sleep for months until he hears that Loki's been sighted back on Alfheim. Loki is not without his defenses, but still. Thor can't help but worry. His child is at Loki's breast, after all. Thor doesn't even know its name.

Thor persists with his cause more stubbornly with every passing year. Policies take time to be implemented. Nothing worthwhile can be borne of haste. Thor likes to envision Loki on his travels, seeing some beautiful bridge, or park, or hospital, and hearing the locals say, *King Thor erected that.*

King Thor funded this school.

King Thor takes after his mother….

Maybe, Thor thinks, he will prove to Loki that he's changed. That he's as good a man as he is a king.

Maybe he could entice Loki to come back.

All Thor can do is wait.

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So it is that Thor came to be one of the most beloved kings in Asgardian history. His rule was distinguished by peace and prosperity, clemency and temperance. Patronage of music, art and literature was at an all-time high. Great advances in science, medicine were achieved. Poverty was lessened, and income inequality was mitigated. It was widely known as a new Golden Age.

Undoubtedly, King Thor's greatest accomplishment was the restoration of Jotunheim back into the fold of the Nine Realms. With the Casket of Ancient Winters repatriated to its ancestral home, Jotunheim began to flourish once again after its long period of stagnation. Trade was likewise reopened to Jotunheim, and from its borders came ivory, furs, gold and fine rubies.

Thus concludes the tale that we had begun long ago.

Ah, but you wish to hear more?

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It is a night like any other. Cool, crisp, with the beginnings of a chill in the air.

Thor trudges up to the Imperial Suite late in the night. It's colder in his rooms than normal, but Thor doesn't bother lighting a fire. His head aches and all he wants to do is fall into bed. The preparations are spiralling out of control; the planners try to involve him in the minutiae of every decision, but on every point Thor is apathetic. He doesn't care what flowers they use for the wreaths, nor what wine they serve at the dinner. He just wants the next two weeks to be over with.

Thor realizes why his rooms are so cold: there's a draft coming in from the balcony doors, which are wide open to the frigid night air. That's odd - Thor doesn't remember having left them open. He can't imagine that the servants would have left them open either.

Then Thor notices something else.

There's a figure just outside the threshold, little more than a shadow in the darkness, barely lit by the light of the full moon. He's clad head to toe in black, like a traveller, with a subtle gold clasp at his throat. Draped over his shoulders is the feather cloak he'd no doubt used to fly up here. The feathers cascade down his back and pool at his feet like a waterfall. He is so, so lovely; matured and yet still glowing with the otherworldly beauty Thor remembers.

Thor's mouth is dry as he stares dumbly at the apparition. He wants to move but finds he's paralyzed, frozen to the ground. The air is punched out of his lungs like a blow to the chest. He'd pictured Loki returning countless times. But now that he's here, long after Thor had given up hope, Thor doesn't know what to say.

Loki seems as startled as Thor. He gains composure more quickly, however.

"Hello, Thor."

Something twists in Thor's chest at the sound of Loki's voice, that touch of a foreign accent. It's him. Unmistakably.

Thor is so astonished that the silence wears on long past what is comfortable. Loki begins to look uncertain.

"Forgive me," Thor somehow manages to say. It comes out sounding strangled, hollow - like

speaking into a vacuum. “I…was not expecting you.”

It’s of little consolation that Loki looks as unmoored by this as Thor is. He smooths down the front of his robes, a nervous tic.

“It’s been awhile, hasn’t it.” Loki agrees softly.

Seven years. It’s been seven long years without Loki by his side, seven years since Thor’s touched him, talked to him, heard his voice. Seven years of desperately clinging to every dreg of news that came to him through vague whispers and rumors.

“I’d given up on ever seeing you again,” says Thor.

“Yes, I imagine you would.” Loki says, almost to himself. He opens his arms. “But here I am.”

“Here you are,” echoes Thor, stunned.

“It’s good to see you,” says Loki awkwardly. “You look well. I’ve heard so much about you across the Realms. King Thor this, King Thor that. It’s frankly a little tiresome.”

He’s aiming to tease, as he used to do, but Thor doesn’t laugh and it falls flat.

“Where is our girl?” Thor had found out that much, from the rumors that reached his ear.

“Sif.”

Thor feels even more dazed. “You named her Sif.”

Loki nods. “It is a good name.”

Thor feels his fingernails dig into his palms. “I wish you’d told me sooner.”

Loki looks genuinely surprised. “I assumed you’d find out.”

"You think I didn’t want to? I kept my distance. It nearly *killed me*. Every day I wondered where you were, if you were alright. Endless nights I spent awake worrying after you. I prayed fervently that you'd seek me out. I’d have given you anything, if you’d have only asked. But no. You didn’t need me. You didn’t even send word, though surely you knew you could have. I took it to mean you wanted nothing more to do with me. So I let you be. I stayed away. I didn’t send anyone after you. I didn’t interfere with your travels, reckless though they may be. I thought that’s what you wanted - to be free of me!”

Loki stares at him. His face is an unreadable mask.

“She’s with me.”

Thor looks about the room urgently. “Here?”

Loki shakes his head. “I...wanted to speak to you alone first.”

Thor crosses his arms in front of his chest. “Then speak.”

It comes out more harsh than Thor intends. Loki’s mouth opens, then closes. He looks unsure, and sad.

“Are you angry with me, Thor?”

Thor is, yes. Angry with Loki at keeping their child from him. But Thor is a different person than he once was. He is acutely aware of the suffering Loki had endured, much of which by his own hand. Thor cannot play the victim here.

“You broke my heart."

Loki accepts this with a nod, as if this was something he’d already known.

“I don't expect you to like my choice, but I hope you’ve come to understand it,” he says. “Had I stayed, I would’ve wondered forever if you’d have truly let me go. I had to be sure you meant it when you gave me my freedom. I see now that you did."

"And was it what you imagined it to be?" Thor asks. "Freedom?"

Loki glances somewhere in the distance. His eyes become faraway. “Oh, Thor," he breathes, little more than a reverent whisper. "It was *everything*."

“I am glad for you,” Thor says, and means it, even though it aches.

They regard each other sadly for awhile, as if to mourn the gap of years, the chasm of space and time.

“I suppose congratulations are in order,” Loki says.

He is referring to Thor's wedding; the bride is to be selected on the morrow. Popular though he is, Thor had been given an ultimatum to either marry or abdicate. Thor might as well roll a die for all he cares. Pity the woman who is wed to him! She condemns herself to a loveless marriage.

“I waited for you," says Thor.

Loki's voice is very quiet. “Well, maybe you shouldn’t have.”

“I’m sorry I was not able to move on as easily as you,” Thor bites. “For loving you as you did not love me. You finally turn up the night before I’m to pick a wife. Why, Loki? To make me suffer? To remind me what I have lost? Why are you here?”

“I shouldn’t have come,” Loki says, wide-eyed. He backs up, fluffing his feathers. “This was a mistake. I’m sorry for disturbing you. My blessing on your union-”

“Don’t go. Wait. Please-” Thor charges across the room. His hand curls around Loki’s arm, the

first physical touch they'd shared since Jotunheim. Loki looks down, startled, at where Thor's hand grips him, holding him back. Thor retracts it immediately, even as he's desperate to hold onto Loki and never let him go.

"Don't leave without at least letting me see her first," Thor pleads.

Loki meets Thor's eyes evenly. "Meet me by the lake, where we used to ride."

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Thor spurs his horse hard. He's worried that if he takes too long, Loki might give up and vanish.

But Loki is exactly where he said he'd be, by the banks of the lake, having arrived long before Thor with his feather-cloak. He waits as Thor dismounts and ties his horse to a nearby tree. Thor scans the clearing as he rushes over to where Loki is standing.

"Where is she?" Thor demands.

"Around," Loki says insouciantly.

"You left her by herself," Thor says, appalled. "A child. Alone at night in the wilderness."

Loki glances at Thor askance. His lips twitch. "This is no ordinary child."

Loki stands there, utterly still. Thor does the same, because he's at a loss of what else to do.

"What are you-"

"Shhh," says Loki, holding up a finger, and Thor falls silent mid-sentence. Loki's eyes are fixed somewhere in the dark distance. What he's looking at, Thor can't say. Thor can barely make out anything at all despite the light of the full moon.

From behind them comes a sudden bright light and a sonic BOOM - a blast, jarring in the otherwise serenely peaceful night. Thor is so on edge that he startles and yelps, nearly making himself trip over his own feet. Loki, meanwhile, is not even ruffled.

“Ah,” he says. “Wait here a moment.”

He jogs off in the direction of the explosion, towards the fire that has taken hold in a thatch of dead bushes near the lake.The light of the fire reveals a smaller figure, little more than a black outline silhouetted against the brightness of the flames.

Using some kind of spell, Loki scoops up a load of water from the lake and sloshes it over the fire, which is extinguished with a smokey hiss. Loki bends down and says something to the little figure, but Thor can’t make out what it is he’s saying or even what language he’s speaking. Loki grabs the figure’s hand and tugs her over to where Thor is still standing, frozen in place.

The first thing Thor notices is the child’s shock of curly golden hair, which is tied back in two long, thick braids down her back. Whereas Loki’s skin is a rich deep cobalt hue, the girl appears to be an icy light blue colour. Across her face are white raised heritage lines - similar to Loki’s, but not quite an exact replica. She looks undeniably alien, and yet somehow familiar - a little bit like Frigga.

“Sif, there is someone I’d like you to meet. This is Thor. He’s the king of Asgard. Say hello.”

The girl looks unimpressed. “Hello.”

“Hello,” Thor chokes out.

Loki crouches down next to her. “Do you want to show us your lightning?”

Sif does not react at all. She’s still watching Thor, unafraid yet clearly suspicious.

“Sif, look at me. Show us your electricity. Thor loves electricity. Don’t you, Thor?”

“Er - yes,” says Thor. “Very much.”

Sif looks like she doesn't care one whit what this strange man thinks. Loki laughs lightly, as if he's a bit embarrassed by her lack of cooperation.

"It's been a long day for her," he mutters by way of explanation. "Sif, I'll give you an ice-pop..."

This seems to coax her. With a furrow of her little brow, she starts to concentrate. Thor is instantly taken back to when he was a child honing his magic skills. Producing lightning had come easy to him; learning to control it had not. That was partially why he had been given Mjolnir. It's been hard for him to manage his magic without her.

At last, a small electricity bolt manifests from the palms of Sif's hands. Loki catches it easily and releases it into the ground.

"Good girl," Loki says, pleased.

They both turn to Thor, awaiting his reaction.

"Wow," Thor eventually says. "That's - really impressive. I liked your fireball too."

Sif tilts her chin up, haughty for such a scrawny child. It's uncanny how much she resembles him for having never met him in her life.

"It was a desolation spell," she corrects.

"Oh," says Thor. "Of course."

"We're working on our restraint," Loki explains, petting her hair, although it doesn't do anything to tame the stray frizzies generated by the static electricity in the air. "What do we say? Just because we can - "

"Doesn't mean we should," the girl finishes with a huff.

“She’s hard to lose, at least,” says Loki. "Only ever a few moments away from obliterating something. I’ll never be able to bring her back to the ascetic mages of Mount Hestvika."

Sif beams proudly at this, displaying a few missing teeth. Whatever she did, she does not appear an iota chastised.

“Can you go play for a few more minutes?” Loki asks her. “I have to speak to Thor privately."

“What about my ice-pop?"

Loki sighs. With an intricate flourish of his hand, he conjures what looks like a bright orange hunk of ice on a stick and hands it to the girl.

Thus placated, Sif skips off, no doubt eager to be dismissed from the company of the adults. With the hand that isn’t holding her treat, she sets about blasting miniature energy bolts into rocks and tree trunks.

"Manageable fires only," Loki calls after her.

Thor's head swims. He’d spent years wondering about his child by Loki. Having met her, however briefly, Thor is struck by a feeling so bittersweet that it physically aches. Their estrangement was not his own doing, but Thor can't help but think that if he had treated Loki better, Loki would have never left in the first place, and Thor wouldn’t have been absent from his daughter’s early life.

“I have trained her with some of the greatest seidr masters in all the Realms,” Loki says in a rush. “She’s very powerful. Angrboda has always said so. And bright. Too stubborn for her own good. She speaks two Jotunn dialects, High Elvish, Allspeak and a Midgardian language called Cantonese...” He looks over at Sif, who appears to now be zapping mosquitos out of the air with miniature energy bolts. “She's so much like you. I can't look at her without being reminded of you. It aches when she asks me where she came from, where *I* came from, and I can’t tell her. What do I even say?" Loki laughs a little and shrugs.

"But she’s growing older, and smarter, and demanding more answers from me - answers I am having more and more difficulty evading. She knows that she isn’t full-blooded Jotun, that she’s different from me and Angrboda. She does not belong in Jotunheim, for she is singly gendered, and not blue enough to pass as a frostling. But neither is she characteristically Asgardian. Or Elvish, or human, or anything remotely recognizable. It's that colouring. Unusual, no? Very rare to cross a

Jotun runt with an Asgardian. We attract attention everywhere we go. Nobody knows what to make of her."

Thor's head is spinning. “She doesn’t know I’m her father?”

Loki looks a little sheepish.

“I am sorry for that, Thor, but I felt it was for the best.”

“For the best,” Thor repeats.

“If I told her, she would want to come here. She'd want to meet you. And I wasn’t ready for that. I wasn’t sure…” His voice trails off. “...If having come back, I could bring myself to leave again."

“So that’s your intention then.” Thor says, oddly numb. “To leave.”

Loki is quiet for a minute. “It wasn’t fair of me to intrude upon a happy moment in your life, dredging up the past, causing you pain. Take heart. Marriage is a blessing."

“You didn’t come to stop me then, did you,” says Thor dryly.

“No. I don’t expect you to alter your decision on my account. Or even to want me, after so long. I came because I wanted to thank you. For letting me go. I know I...hurt you, in leaving. For choosing freedom over you. But I needed it, Thor. I can’t express to you how much.”

It takes a few minutes for Thor’s brain to process what Loki is saying.

Puzzled, Thor says, “Why do you think I wouldn't want you?”

“Because-” Loki looks startled. “Because I waited too long. I broke your heart. I kept your child from you." He looks away. "It was not easy for me to do that to you, despite what you might think. Not that I expect your pity; I accept the repercussions of the choice I made. If it means you are angry with me forever, then so be it. But would I do it again?" That distant look returns to Loki’s

eyes. “In a heartbeat. Freedom was the greatest gift you could have ever given me."

Thor is so overcome he starts to laugh. “So that’s all you came here for? To *thank me*? This night -” Thor gesticulates wildly, “The night before I am to select a bride, out of *all the nights* you could have returned. You chose *this one*.”

Loki looks embarrassed. “As I said, I am sorry for my timing. I was in Nidavellir, and couldn’t come sooner...”

“And what, exactly, were you hoping to accomplish?”

“I - I don’t know,” Loki says. “I just wanted to see you. To wish you well, before you embark on the next phase of your life. It would not have been appropriate for me to turn up out of the ether after you are married. I doubt your...future wife would appreciate such a thing. To tell you the truth, I almost didn’t come at all. Angrboda told me I was a fool. He said no good would come of it. Whether or not he was right, I am still glad I did. It would have never finished between us otherwise."

Loki takes a deep breath. "I have said what I came here to say. Thank you for hearing me."

"You don't have to go,” Thor says quickly. “You could stay in Asgard. You and...Sif. At least for a time."

"Though you have my best wishes, Thor, the one thing I cannot do is stay here and watch you be married to someone else."

"Why not?” Thor returns hotly. “If it is finished between us, as you say, then surely you would have no qualms about it. I would be honoured to have you as my guest."

Loki shakes his head. "It isn't that simple..."

“When has anything between us been simple? Stay, Loki. Celebrate with me. You are free to leave at your leisure.”

Loki sighs. "I can't."

"Look me in the eye and tell me we are done," Thor demands, unable to dull the harsh edge in his voice. "For this to end I need to hear it from your lips. I would go to the altar happily if only I knew for certain that we were over. That is all I ask. That's what I have been waiting for, for *seven years.* Tell me, Loki. Tell me we are finished."

Loki looks away abashedly. His face twists, but he says nothing.

"You cannot," says Thor, equal parts hurt and disappointed. "You cannot grant me that one small concession. I let you go, yet you will not do the same for me." Thor clenches his jaw and releases him. "Go then. Raise our child on your own, if that is your desire. Rest assured I do not harbour any ill-will towards you. In fact I am grateful, for I was made a better man for having known you. It warms my heart to hear that your choice was the right one. I am comforted to know that my heartache was worth the cost." Thor straightens. "Now, it is late. I appreciate you coming, but I ask now that you leave me in peace."

Walking away is the single hardest thing Thor has ever had to do. He won't beg, he won't command. Seeing Loki again has made him as raw as a reopened wound. If he were to let his guard down even a fraction, his entire wall of defenses would come crashing down. Losing Loki had shattered the last of the old Thor. He'd pieced himself back together in the intervening years, but only patchily; inside, he is as fragile as porcelain. Thor has to protect himself. He won't be made vulnerable to that level of hurt again.

"Thor, wait."

Thor turns. His heart is hammering but he dares not show it on his face.

Loki chews his lip, unsure. There's a long silence that passes.

"I told you once, a long time ago, when I revealed my secret, that I chose you. That I wanted to raise our child in Asgard, with you. I suppose you must think that it was a lie - an effort, on my part, to curb your wrath. But I did mean it at the time, even if my actions thereafter say otherwise. I simply was not ready. Do you believe me?"

Thor sighs. He feels so tired. "I don't know, Loki. I don't know what to believe."

"Fair enough. I don’t expect you to trust anything I say." Loki opens his hands apologetically. "If you want me to tell you we’re finished, then we are finished. But that would be another lie, one which would tear me up inside to utter. The truth is, I could go to the furthest recesses of the universe and my heart will still cry out for you. I will never be at peace so long as I am without you. No matter what you do or who you marry, you will always be my beloved, my *svass*, and I will be yours. From now until the last I draw breath."

Thor blinks, as if to clear a film from his vision. “I’m - I’m what?”

“My svass,” Loki says ruefully. “My soulmate.”

Thor can’t believe what he’s hearing.

“You fool,” Loki says, sad yet fond. “How could you not have known.”

“I -” Thor’s throat is dry. “I did not dare - “

“Yes. I imagine so, given our past. You have trouble believing that I cared for you. That I *still* care for you. Which brings me to the real reason I came here tonight."

Loki takes a deep breath, as if to brace himself. Thor forgets to breathe at all.

“Thor, I - “ Loki’s voice is small, like a lost child's. "I came to ask if I could come home.”

Thor can hardly hear himself over the rushing noise in his ears. He already feels his hard-won defenses beginning to crumble.

"Do you mean that? Do you truly mean that? Because I can't -" Thor's voice starts to choke. "I can’t lose you again. If you want to come back, if you want - *this* -” He gestures wildly between the two of them, “Then make it permanent. Marry me two weeks hence, in the place of the bride I have yet to select. I won't have you any other way."

“Yes.”

Thor blinks several times. “Yes?”

Loki looks equally stunned, if not moreso. But he says it again, firm and certain:

“Yes.”

Thor can’t help himself. He takes Loki in his arms like he will never let him go. It feels so right to hold him, like restoring a piece of himself that had been missing for so long. Something breaks inside Thor.

“Loki,” Thor groans. “Oh Loki.”

"I thought you’d hardened your heart against me…" Loki’s voice is muffled. “I thought I was too late.”

“Never,” Thor breathes in the scent of him. So familiar, and yet new: of rain and wet leaves, loamy like rich earth. “I have thought of nothing but you every day for seven years. I have dreamed of you each night. All I have ever wanted is for you to return to me. Freely. And you have."

Loki sobs into his shoulder. They cling to each other like that for a long while, not even pausing to look up at the chaos Sif is wreaking on the countryside.

"Marry me, Loki," Thor says, pulling back and cupping Loki's face. Thor can hardly believe it so he feels the need to say it again and again. "Marry me, marry me.”

"Aye," answers Loki, dazed. "Let's marry."

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The journey back to the palace is done on foot. Or rather, with Loki and Sif on horseback, and with Thor leading the horse. Sif, exhausted by her mischief, is semiconscious in Loki’s arms by the time they finally reach the Imperial suite.

"This place is foreign to her," Loki whispers to Thor. "I will lay down next to her until she sleeps."

"Do you need, uh, sleep clothes? Your effects are stored in the northernmost antechamber." Thor pauses, then adds. "I can find something that will fit Sif…."

Loki looks at him. "You kept my things?"

Thor nods a little. His neck heats and he feels embarrassed, though he couldn't say why.

"I have what I need," Loki says at last. "But thank you."

"Will you come…?" Thor's voice trails off. He gestures vaguely to his bedchamber.

Loki's eyes dart in the direction Thor had motioned to. Thor kicks himself; he oughtn't presume that Loki would share his bed tonight.

Then Loki surprises him by saying, "Yes, later."

Thor sets Loki and Sif up in a small guest bedroom in the Suite, then leaves them to settle in. Dazedly, Thor goes to his own bedroom and lies down. Although he's utterly exhausted and wrung out, he's unable to make himself relax. He's nervous and excited, much too revved to even close his eyes. His heart is hammering in his chest. He worries Loki won't come.

But he does, an indiscernible amount of time later, padding into the bedroom as though he feels he doesn't belong. He's wearing sleep clothes Thor doesn't recognize. How Loki got them, Thor can't say. He didn't appear to be carrying any luggage.

"She's asleep," Loki tells him.

"Good - that's good."

Stiffly, Loki climbs into bed and lies down next to Thor, on the side of the bed he always used to sleep on. Neither one knows what to say to the other. It still shocks Thor to see Loki here - like a ghost from the past. Thor gets the sense Loki feels the same.

"Did you think I would come back?" Loki asks, breaking the silence.

Thor has to consider this. His feelings on the matter are hard to untangle: a combination of hope, longing, grief, anger, and lately, resignation.

"Yes. And also…no."

“You must have thought I would, since you kept my things.”

Thor shrugs, feeling embarrassed again. He doesn’t want to have to explain himself, so he turns the question around: "Did you want to come back before now?"

Loki’s eyes flit away. He seems to think for a long time.

"Yes," he says at last. "And also no."

Thor feels sad all of a sudden. Tiredly he asks, "Did you only come just because you'd heard I was going to be married."

Loki shifts uncomfortably, and Thor can tell that his answer, at least in part, will be *yes.*

"I had been thinking of returning for awhile now,” Loki hedges. “I might've cut my travels a bit short in coming here tonight but….I knew this would be my last chance for us to be together. I admit I was afraid. I wasn't sure how you'd react to seeing me again."

This does not exactly make Thor feel better. "You were afraid of me?"

Loki blurts out a little laugh. “No, not like that. Not like that at all. It's just - it's hard to be confronted by the fact that you've hurt someone you care for." Loki adds softly: "I know you know

that."

Thor nods. He does know that.

“You really mean to stay,” Thor says dumbly.

"I said I would, didn't I? We can hardly be married if we are apart. Besides, Angrboda is sick of me dragging his arse across the Realms. And Sif…..Sif has never laid her head on the same pillow twice. No, that chapter in my life has closed. If I never have to lodge at another roadside inn I will die happy."

"I’m being serious. If you ever left again-"

“I won’t.”

“I need you to hear me,” Thor says firmly. “You aren’t just marrying me. You’ll be queen; you’ll be committing to Asgard as much as to me. You won’t be able to do as you please, go where you please. Even I can’t do that.”

“I know,” Loki says quietly. "That was part of why I had to go. I admit, the prospect of being your queen was daunting to me. It still is. I was not ready before. But I am ready now.” He pauses; a funny smile graces his lips. “I think."

"I don’t feel ready to be King half the time,” says Thor, lamely.

Loki laughs a little at this. Norns, how Thor has missed that sound.

“That might've made me feel better if you weren’t so beloved across the Realms. Seems to me you are doing quite well.”

"I wanted to make you proud," Thor says before he even thinks better of it.

Loki’s face softens. He looks like he might be touched.

"You really are a fool," is what he says.

Loki traces the contours of Thor's face with his fingertips, and Thor shivers under the inspection.

"I'm glad you waited. I didn't expect you to, but I'm glad you did."

"There is no one else I'd rather have as my queen," says Thor simply.

"Why?" Loki asks, but there's no heat in it. Rather, he sounds almost….incredulous. "Why me?"

"Because I love you."

Loki shakes his head and laughs. "Be that as it may, that doesn't mean I'd make a good queen."

"I wouldn't have asked if I didn't think you could do it," Thor says, echoing what he'd once told Loki long ago.

Loki smiles again. "Well, I will certainly make a more informed queen than I otherwise would've been. I had no idea how sheltered I was until I saw the Realms for myself. It was good for me to see how the common people live, to witness their struggles. I had never been out in the world on my own before."

"Would you show me?" Thor asks, gesturing to his forehead, alluding to the Bridge. "I'd like to see where you've been. I'd like to see…Sif, as she grew up."

"I would be happy to. Not tonight, but I will."

"I am grateful for the chance to be her father, even if the opportunity comes later than I would have liked," says Thor. Loki opens his mouth to respond, but Thor stops him: "It's alright. I understand why you did what you did. I know I did not give you much reason to believe I'd be an involved father. I made so many mistakes with Njall, Edda and Gyda. I am trying to rectify that now. I won't send them away from court."

Loki's eyebrows raise. "I would never ask you to."

"Thank you." says Thor with a slight clearing of his throat. "I should warn you, they likely won't take kindly to the news of our...uh, *engagement*." Thor can't believe it even as he says it. "Njall especially. He's spent a lot of time with his mother."

"I shall do my best to earn their trust. They are a part of you, Thor. I would never come between you and your children. I am glad to see you taking on the mantle of fatherhood."

Loki leans forward, tips his chin up and nips at Thor's lips with his own. Thor is startled, but quickly submits with a groan. It's been so long since he's been kissed, let alone been kissed by *Loki*. It's even better because Loki initiated it. He'd missed this. He'd missed this so much.

They spend a few more moments like this, nosing each other like puppies and exchanging timid little kisses. Emboldened, Thor surges forwards and deepens the kiss, and is thrilled when Loki opens his mouth for Thor to lick at it. Thor has thirsted for this for so long; now that he's reached this oasis, he so badly wants to drink deep. Loki needs very little encouragement to reciprocate in kind. Their tongues soon get involved, and Loki lets out a soft, pouting moan.

Thor shifts closer, propping himself up on his elbow so that his face is hovering over Loki's. Thor moves his body closer, and-

Loki's hand is between them, on Thor's sternum, a gentle pressure, "Would you wait until we are married? It would…mean a lot to me, if - "

Loki looks nervous, as if he's hesitant to turn down Thor's advances. An old habit. Thor is saddened by this, but unsurprised. He will have to rid Loki of the presumption that he must always submit to Thor's wishes. Despite the want, Thor would wait another seven years if he had to. Even a lifetime would be worth it.

"Yes, of course." Thor lies back down at Loki's side.

Loki starts to blush. "You're staring…"

"I can't believe you're here," Thor says dumbly.

Loki smiles, looking bewildered himself. "Neither can I."

***

Thor awakes finding himself alone. He bolts upright in a panic, thinking he'd dreamt it all. Then he hears soft voices drifting in from the guest room.

"You're awake," Loki smiles when Thor barges in. He's sitting on the bed, braiding the girl's hair. It makes for a startlingly domestic scene. In the light, Thor can see that Sif's eyes are red, but only the irises and not the entire sclera.

"Er, morning," Thor says.

Loki turns Sif around to face him. "Sif, there is something very important I need to tell you. Thor is your father, and from now on you and I are going to be living with him, here in Asgard."

Sif's eyes dart to Thor. She has a comically suspicious face. Calculating, even, in as much as one can expect from a seven year old. The magnitude of this information is clearly lost on her. For all her godlike destructive powers, she is still very much a little girl.

"Don't you think Asgard is a beautiful place?" Loki prompts.

"What about Boda?"

"Boda can visit if he wants but I do believe he is sick of me." Loki pets her freshly braided head. "I know all of this is a lot to take in, and I am sorry for not telling you sooner. I wanted to be sure that we would be staying here first. Thor and I are going to marry."

Sif replies in a Jotunn language, which Thor doesn' t understand. Whatever she says makes Loki laugh. He replies to her in Allspeak for Thor's benefit.

"I know sweet pea; I didn't like him at first either. Thor is a stranger to you. But I am sure in time you will come to love him as I do. And he's going to get you a pony."

Thor is floored by that passing admission. Loki looks amused. Sif looks at Thor expectantly.

“Yes. A pony,” Thor says when he finally finds his tongue. “Whatever you want.”

“And we will get you magic tutors so you can keep up with your training,” Loki finishes. "You will like it here, I promise. You will be a princess and have many, many people to boss."

She seems mollified by that. “I’m hungry.”

“Of course. We will have breakfast brought up at once. And then we will show you around your new home.”

***

The formal announcement is made at the banquet that night. The shock is palpable when Thor emerges arm-in-arm with Loki - *Prince* Loki, the lost nephew of King Laufey of Jotunheim - and declares their intention to marry. Loki's Jotunn skin is startling in and of itself, let alone the revelation that he’s of royal descent. Loki bears this upheaval with grace, although Thor can tell he’s nervous - the court was never that welcoming to him. But that was before, when Loki was thought to be a mere slave. Back then, there was not much Thor could do to curb the incessant parade of ladies and princesses vying for his hand in marriage. Those days are over, Thor thinks gleefully. He will be lawfully wedded to Loki, such that even the most pigheaded naysayers will be unable to dispute his marriage’s legitimacy. Thor vows that henceforth he will not allow anyone to disrespect his Queen, nor his half-Jotun child. Anyone who dares will quickly see themselves dismissed from court.

One by one, the lords, ladies, counsellors and countries come forwards to pledge their allegiance. Lord Fandral is amongst them. He approaches with a stunned look on his face - he hadn’t seen Loki in his Jotun form either, although he regains his composure more quickly than most.

“Prince Loki,” he says, bowing.

"He knows," whispers Thor into Loki’s ear.

A host of very complex emotions flit across Loki’s face. "Ah."

"I will take your secret to my death,” Fandral says lowly, so that only Thor and Loki can hear. Then, more audibly: “I will be honoured to serve you. My Queen."

He means to bow again, but Loki stops him. Instead, Loki eschews formality and embraces him tightly, as one would a dear, long-lost friend. They are bonded by the loss and the trauma they’d both suffered on the icy fields of Jotunheim, and by the secret they are sworn to keep. Fandral has proven himself a true and loyal friend more times than Thor can count - the only person Thor could truly confide in. The two of them had spent countless nights mourning their fallen friends and drinking to their memories. Without him, Thor doesn’t know how he would’ve gotten through these last seven years.

"Sif would have been honoured," Fandral tells Loki softly.

Loki ducks his head. Thor can see, through his own wet eyes, that there are tears gliding down Loki's cheeks.

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Angrboda arrives from Jotunheim across the Bifrost not long thereafter. He causes quite the stir: seven feet tall and dressed in a raw hide cloak with red paint slathered across his eyes. He is serenely unperturbed by the ruckus he causes. Thor notes that part of his right horn has broken off; Thor doesn’t think it was like that when he’d last seen him. Thor elects not to ask about it.

Sif lets out a shrill squeal of delight when she lays her eyes on him. She immediately pounces him and sets about using him like a climbing tree, which Angrboda withstands with only a touch of mild annoyance. Thor is jealous of his daughter’s obvious affection for Angrboda. He was there for everything Thor had missed: her first words, her first steps, her first lightning bolt.

Loki senses Thor's sulk.

“She just needs time to warm up to you," Loki reassures, threading his hand through Thor's arm. "She is stubborn as a mule but she will come around. Angrboda and I have been the only two constants in her life. Having a stable home will be good for her. She needs friends her own age. She needs a father.”

Angrboda peels Sif off him, takes her hands in his massive one and swings her around like a small monkey. Sif laughs gleefully; she loves this rough play. With Thor's daughter dangling from one arm, Angrboda approaches and does a cursory, irreverent bow. Thor allows this breach of etiquette with no comment. He can't stand on much ceremony with Angrboda. Thor owes the hulking witch more than he could ever pay, and Angrboda knows it.

"Majesties," Angrboda says, drolly, as if it amuses him to address them thusly. "Laufey-King wishes for me to send his congratulations."

Loki rolls his eyes. "I am sure he is delighted."

"He is, actually." Angrboda sets Sif down, despite her vociferous protests. "Although he regrets to inform you that he is in ill health and will be unable to attend the wedding. He will send Farbauti and his heir Bylestir in his stead."

"Thank you for coming, old friend," says Thor.

"How could I miss this: the marriage of my acolyte to the King of Asgard. I did not save your life for nothing, Thor-King." Angrboda turns to Loki. "Nor did I keep your scrawny hide alive for seven years to reap no reward."

"If there is any reward you seek, old friend, you have only to name it," says Thor.

"Boda, watch my cartwheel," Sif whines, tugging on Angrboda's sleeve.

"I was going to request your second born, but I have seen what a hellion your first was," Angrboda laments. "Oh, spare me such torment! Let me retire and rest these weary bones!"

Thor is caught off guard. "Second one?"

The old witch's red eyes glint. "For that beautiful cradle, of course. Shame it has gone unused for so long."

Thor looks at Loki askance and finds that he's blushing violently.

"Let's just get through the wedding, shall we," Loki mutters.

"Yes of course. Only one page can be turned at a time," says Angrboda loftily. “As to my reward, I do think a sizable yearly stipend is reasonable. And I must stress the word *sizeable.* I intend to reopen my Sanctuary in Jotunheim, and as you can imagine, I will require a substantial amount of funding…”

"Consider it done,” Thor says, and Angrboda nods his head in appreciation.

“You will come visit?” Loki asks. His voice has taken on an uncertain, almost child-like quality. Angrboda has acted as something of a parental figure to Loki for so long; in many respects, Loki still needs his reassurance and guidance.

Angrboda must pick up on this too, because when he speaks again, it’s with an earnestness he hadn’t exhibited before.

“Where I can, Rabbit,” he says, his usual sarcasm giving way to something warm and fond. "If I may be of any service to you, you need only ask."

Thor and Loki exchange fleeting glances. Thor scratches his neck; Loki blushes anew.

"Well," Thor clears his throat, "As a matter of fact..."

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In the end, their wedding is small, much smaller than originally planned. This is Loki’s preference. Although initially Thor resisted having to cull the guest list, in the end he is glad for it. The ceremony is quiet and intimate, without the extravagant pomp of Thor's coronation. There will be plenty of opportunities for lavish celebrations over the course of their reign. For now, this is just about Thor and Loki, what they’d been through together, and how far they’ve come. There is no one to give Loki away, nor does Loki wish to be given away. This too is Loki’s preference: a clear statement not only that he is doing this of his own free will, but also to reiterate that there is no one who holds sovereignty over him. Fandral is Thor’s witness, and Angrboda is Loki’s. Sif is more interested in her new dress than anything; she spends most of the ceremony engaging in horseplay with Fandral’s young daughter, with whom she appears to have taken a shine to. The day is both startlingly natural and viscerally surreal, like living in a dream.

Later comes the feast, which is altogether a more exuberant affair. Asgardians love a party, especially a wedding, and *especially* a royal wedding. There is an abundance of food, drink, dancing, and singing. The streets of Asgard are crowded with joyous revellers partaking liberally of the free wine and mead. At midnight comes the fireworks, which Thor and Loki watch from the balcony of the Imperial Suite, having retired early from the festivities. They'd recruited Angrboda to babysit for the night (much to the old witch's chagrin), so now there is nothing left standing between them and the night ahead.

An awkwardness settles over them both. They'd been alone together plenty, but that was when sex was off the table.

“Can I -”

“How do you -”

They both stop, laughing shyly at each other.

“You can touch me, Thor,” Loki says.

Thor does, gratefully. He rests his hands on Loki's shoulders, then down his arms to feel the substance of him. Thor still can't really believe Loki is here, let alone that they're *married.* He will likely never stop being stunned that Loki came back.

"Shall I....?” Loki asks, gesturing loosely to Thor's armour.

Help you undress, he means. Thor is suddenly even more jittery than he was before, since this implies that Loki intends on consummating this marriage tonight. In truth Thor hadn't been sure whether Loki would be ready for that. Thor is of course willing, but he's also nervous; he doesn't want to start their marriage off on the wrong foot.

"Yes," Thor says with a cough. "Thank you."

Loki starts to undo Thor's ceremonial armour, starting with the vambraces, first the left then the right, just as he used to do. For all of Thor's bout of nerves, Loki seems calm. He exudes a kind of

quiet, inner confidence that is entirely new, entirely natural, and it suits him. This Loki is different from the one Thor once knew - more mature, more self-assured and assertive. His freedom has done him good. Thor wonders fleetingly if Loki's taken other lovers during his travels. He decides it doesn't matter. Loki is his now, in the only way that truly matters.

Next, Loki removes Thor's chest plate and unclips his cape, both of which he sets aside with care. Thor exhales in relief at being released from the chest plate. He'd eaten a lot at the feast, and it was becoming quite confining.

Thor rubs his freed stomach appreciatively and groans. "That feels *so much* better."

Loki chuckles. "When will you admit you need a larger size."

"This armor was my grandfather's. I have to wear it."

"Then perhaps you should consider limiting your consumption of ale and pies?"

"So soon you begin to nag me, wife," Thor teases.

Loki snorts incredulously. "*Wife,"* he says, although Thor can tell he's amused.

"Does that term bother you?" Thor asks, for in truth he isn't sure what else to call him. These are things they probably should have discussed before they'd gotten married, but the last two weeks had flown by with such haste that the thought hadn't even crossed his mind.

Loki shakes his head. "I would be called anything so long as it means I am yours and you are mine." His eyes glitter. "*Husband.*"

Thor smiles broadly. It's so unbelievable to hear Loki use that word. Thor will never tire of it.

At that, Loki pulls Thor's doublet and undershirt over his head, leaving Thor bare-chested. The mood instantly shifts and turns somber.

“Oh, Thor,” Loki whispers.

Covering almost the entirety of Thor’s chest is an ugly weblike scar: a testament to having survived the attack that should have killed him. It *did* kill him, in a way; the last vestiges of the old Thor died on the frozen tundra of Jotunheim. Thor’s healers had suggested several remedies to help the scar fade, but Thor had always refused. He doesn’t want to go back to the way he once was. He doesn’t want to erase the past.

Loki traces the ridges of the scar with his fingertips, over each winding branch, each sinuous ridge. He curls over and reverently kisses the central point, the epicenter of Helblindi's blast. Thor shudders; this attention makes him feel vulnerable, but he does not especially dislike it. It reminds him how much they’d been through together. Loki saved his life on Jotunheim. Loki brought Helblindi down when Thor could not. The rest of Asgard can never know of Loki’s act of heroism, but Thor will never forget.

“You should take these off,” Loki suggests, his hands on Thor’s waistband. Shakily, Thor obeys, undoing his belt and stepping out of his pants and boots until he’s nude in front of Loki. He is so, so nervous and he can’t say why. He had lain with Loki more times than he could count - but that was ages ago. This time feels different, and not just because of the lost years. Thor knows it feels different to Loki too.

Thor doesn’t know how to touch Loki, what he’s allowed. He doesn’t want to *impose*. Intuiting this, Loki takes initiative and starts to undress himself, starting with his gold jewelry, then his sash, then his long Jotun overcoat, until at last Loki pulls off his underclothes, likewise leaving him nude.

It’s Thor’s turn to drink Loki in, and he does so with the same quiet awe with which Loki had beheld him. It’s not that Loki’s in his Jotun form; Thor had seen him like this already. Rather, it’s because now Thor understands the significance of his heritage lines. The whirls and swoops are more than just decorative; they designate Loki as a member of the royal house of Jotunheim, and consequently, as being a worthy spouse to Thor. They are his pride and his identity. Thor takes a moment to admire them in their entirety. They criss-cross Loki’s body symmetrically, across his arms, chest, thighs, down to his feet. He is just as beautiful as Thor remembers, perhaps moreso; lean and lightly muscled with lustrous blue skin. Loki is not yet aroused, as his cock is not yet hard, but he doesn’t look scared or nervous. Or if he is, he’s better at hiding it.

Thor traces Loki's heritage lines with a light fingertip, just as Loki had traced his scar. Gracing Loki’s hips and stomach are stretch marks from when he’d carried their child. Thor pays these particular reverence. Thor can’t help but think of Angrboda’s passing comment - about the possibility of a second child. Thor finds, after he’d digested the idea somewhat, that he’s excited at the prospect. He wants to build a family with Loki. He wants another chance to be the father to Loki’s children.

They soak each other in quietly for what feels like minutes, hours, as they take turns exploring each

other's bodies and refamiliarizing themselves with each other. They do not speak. Instead, they let touch communicate everything they mean to say. It's intimate - perhaps more intimate even than sex. Thor feels exposed, stripped bare, and not just physically. He is no king here. He is just a man - a man with his new wife on their wedding night. As simple as can be.

Loki breaks away first. Wordlessly he moves to sit down on the edge of the bed and scoots backwards toward the pillows, all the while never breaking eye contact with Thor. Once fully reclined, he lets his legs fall open in invitation, revealing the petal lips of his blue cunt. The outer folds of him are a lovely lilac colour, but his innermost core is invitingly pink.

Loki starts to play with himself, keeping his eyes still locked on Thor's. Thor can't help but gawk. The image of him like this, with his fingers inside himself, is so brazen, so wanton, so erotic that Thor's half-hard erection starts quickly starts to strain with need. Loki allows him to look his fill, then with
the hand that isn't deep within his cunt, he crooks his fingers, beckoning to Thor.

Gratefully Thor comes and crawls over Loki's prone body. They keep the distance between their lips steady as Loki lies back on the pillow, until at last there's nowhere left for him to go. Loki's eyes are bright in the darkness, wide yet unafraid as Thor rests his full weight on top of him. Thor groans at the feeling of Loki's cool bare skin against his own, for this is something Thor thought he'd never have the privilege of experiencing again. After dropping a whisper soft kiss onto Loki's jaw, Thor skims one hand up and down every part of Loki that he can reach, every inch of skin that isn't covered by Thor's own body. Loki throws his arms around Thor's neck, drawing him closer to kiss him full on the mouth. This makes Thor moan; no kiss is sweeter than the one freely given.

They continue to kiss lazily as they grind against each other. Loki's cock has hardened against Thor's stomach, a feeling that thrills Thor immeasurably. Thor is achingly hard himself, and has been for awhile, but he is content to draw this out. The unhurried pace seems fitting for their wedding night. They have the rest of their lives ahead of them; there is no need to rush.

Loki's eyes roll back then flutter closed when Thor finally lines up his cock and enters him. His jaw goes slack and he whimpers softly, little more than a mewl, perhaps betraying a bit of discomfort. He's wet with arousal, but very tight. His fingernails dig painfully into Thor's shoulders, neither pushing him away nor drawing him nearer. Thor can tell it's an effort for Loki to take him, so Thor restraints himself as best he can. This is very difficult to do, for the feeling of Loki's lush cunt around him is exquisite, and Thor wants nothing more than to thrust in deep and claim Loki the way he's long desired. Nonetheless, he pushes in in gradual increments, giving Loki plenty of time to acclimatize to the feeling of being filled so substantially.

"It's been awhile," Loki pants. "Go slow. Don't stop, but go slow."

Thor nods. When at last he sinks in to the hilt, Thor pauses to focus on Loki's beautiful face. Loki blinks up at him, his red eyes glittering preternaturally in the darkness, so deep and prismatic Thor feels like he's drowning in them. Thor is moved by the trust that Loki has placed in him, that Loki would let him do this even after everything they'd been through.

“You can move,” Loki croaks.

And so, Thor begins rocking with slow, thorough thrusts, spreading Loki’s wetness inside and out to allow a smoother glide. Loki’s hands grasp Thor’s upper arms with a comforting familiarity, and together they begin to find their rhythm. Their bodies quickly fall into harmony, as if hardly any time had passed at all since they’d last done this. Loki is sweet and snug around him, sheathing Thor’s cock as though he were made for him. When Loki’s whimpers turn to less ambiguous noises of pleasure, Thor starts to plunge in and out in earnest, savoring Loki’s unbelievable tightness and warmth. Thor fills him with confident, fluid-like movements, although he takes just as much delight in the long drag out.

Loki's hands are cradling Thor's face. “Thor,” he says, breathy and hitching and not like his normal voice because he is so full of Thor, so utterly intertwined are they, that they are as two trees which have grown side-by-side and whose roots have become inseparably gnarled together. Thor can hardly even think, his heart is pounding so hard. It feels *so good* to be reunited with Loki in this carnal way, so right. Like being made whole again.

“You came back,” Thor says helplessly.

Loki doesn’t answer right away, but the look in his eyes is so poignant, so bittersweet, that it makes Thor want to cry.

"I came back," he echoes.

Loki locks his legs around Thor’s hips to drive him even deeper, and in this manner they rock together and exchange humid breaths from parted mouths. Loki kisses him again: so deeply and languidly that it’s like a balm on the wound of the last seven years.

Loki climaxes with a breathy moan, tossing his head back, and it’s the most magnificent thing Thor has ever seen. His cock spits a little load on his belly and his cunt clenches around Thor's cock rhythmically. Thor fucks him through it with vigor. He’s overcome by the heady knowledge that he’d brought Loki pleasure. Loki, his great love. His bride, his -

“What was that word?” Thor asks. “That word you called me?”

Loki blinks at him, dazed from his orgasm. Then his eyes glint in understanding.

“My svass,” he says. “My svass.”

Thor's hips stutter, losing their rhythm. He'd meant to last longer, but already his own orgasm is fast coiling in his belly, futile to resist. His orgasm blossoms, but it does not immediately crest. Rather, it grows more intense and irrepressible by the second, like a great wave piling up on top of itself as it accelerates towards shore. When at last the pleasure reaches its zenith, Thor sobs and thrusts to the root, spurting his seed deep inside. This feels important - as if Thor is staking his claim within Loki after so many years apart. Loki is *his*, his lawful spouse, as Thor is Loki's. Forever and always.

Thor pants wetly into Loki's shoulder as he comes down from the high. He feels boneless and wrung out, utterly satisfied. Spent, he flops down next to Loki and gathers him into his arms. The brightness of their coupling eventually fades into a quietly glowing ember, a perfect serene moment in which only the two of them exist. They lie like that for some time, sweaty and exhausted, gazing at each in silence. Loki smoothes back Thor's damp hair and smiles fondly; Thor can't help but grin crookedly back at him. There is so much left to say, so much left unspoken, but they have the rest of their lives to account for that. For now, all that matters is that they are here together, reunited at last.

Lying there with Loki, Thor is overcome by a swell of emotion. The feeling is quite unlike anything Thor has experienced before - as if all his longing and grief has been sublimated into something pure, something beautiful. The pleasure springs from a place so deep there is no name for it. All Thor knows is that he will never, ever take this for granted.

Thor does not sleep at all that night, despite his exhaustion. He wants to soak in this moment so that he will remember it for the rest of his life. Everything is as it ought to be. Their future unfurls itself in his mind's eye, replete with happiness and sorrow, great victories and great defeats. Thor is eager for it, because he has Loki at his side, and with him Thor can meet any challenge.

After all, this is only the beginning.

Chapter End Notes

That's it that's the end. I can't believe it. 2014 me would be so proud! *pops champagne* Sorry it took so got dang long for me to update!!! A whole YEAR smh. I really struggled to wrap this up in a satisfying way, so hopefully it was exactly what everyone was hoping for. Thank you to everyone who supported me these last six years by leaving kudos and comments, and to everyone who dedicated their own time to translate this fic into other languages (Asagi_Translator, Maryandmathew, and Allennder) and make fanart like THIS one and THIS one!!! I wouldn't have even come CLOSE to finishing this if it weren't for you.

So, the title of this story refers to metamorphosis. Thor changes because of Loki, Loki is Thor's chrysalis. Kind of cheeseball but there you go. Let's just accept that this fic is 95% hokey melodramatic cliché and get on with it. (NOTE: I don't actually think you can change an abusive person they way Loki has changed Thor. This is just a work of fiction!)

Loki's story was based on a historical queen: Roxelana. Minus the whole secret spy thingie, that was aaaaall me. And yeah okay. I regret having given Thor kids way back in chapter five, but I did, so I had to address it here. Can't finish this story with Thor as a deadbeat dad, now can I? They are going to have a beautiful blended family and Loki will have like seven more babies and live happily ever after. So there.

I have a shiny new Thorki Twitter if you want to follow me there.

I am continuing Chrysalis!verse with some AU oneshots, listed below. If you have a good plotbunny or wishfic, leave me a comment, and if I like it enough I might write it ^^

Chrysalis!Verse Aus
2. Slave!Loki never earns Thor's love, but he sure earns THAT DICK. Porn au. [complete - formerly chapter 13]
3. Helblindi is the crowned King of Jotunheim under suspicious circumstances, and Loki is his hapless charge. King Thor of Asgard somehow gets caught in the middle. NEW. [complete]
4. Odin lingers for years on the brink of falling into Odinsleep, all while being dutifully waited on by his Jotunn slave Loki. Thor has an extreme case of blue balls. [WIP]
5. ???? Odin wakes up?????? (that would be dumb as hell but I'm tempted)

Also check out my latest Thorki projects:
THE RIG. Modern dystopia human AU, parts 9/9 now posted. It's basically gratuitous Hurt/Comfort idfic. Thor is a mercenary and Loki is a sex worker.

AND, HOMESONG, in which Thor is massively crushed on, and continuously trolled

by, a beautiful singing witch.

I’m curious about my readers: Where in the world are you located? At the time of this epilogue's posting, I’m 30F from Canada. Would love to know if anyone is willing to share!

I did this for free in my spare time. It was an OBSCENE amount of work. If you enjoyed this fic there is no better way to thank me (or any other author) than to please, PLEASE leave a comment!!!! Truly they make my day!!! I will reply, although sometimes it takes me a hot minute to get around to everyone. Or, donate to the Archive, to keep this wonderful site up and ad-free ^^

much much MUCH love! Teresa xox

End Notes

hope you enjoyed! xoxox

Works inspired by this one: Chrysalis (Japanese Translation) 蛹 by Asagi_translator, Everything has a dark side by Ikitagarinashirayuki

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!